

RANGE WAR has broken out on Sudden Range. The old timers object to Seth Peabody, the new-comer on the Lazy S, bringing sheep into what has always been cow country.

"He either goes back to where he comes from or we blow him and his sheep to hell," are the sentiments of the ranchers. This suits the plans of a certain Lance Harder perfectly and he does all he can to make the range war a good one.

Ted Kelly, cousin of three of the local ranch owners, takes on himself the role of dove of peace and finds himself shot at by both sides. His agility and fast gunplay keep his skin whole, helped by Dale Leander, range detective, who saves him from being the centre of interest at a lynching party. Together they succeed in uniting the ranchers against the common enemy, the Sioux Indians, who have been armed and incited to rebellion by Harder. The book ends with the wild warwhoops of the Sioux warriors ringing in our ears.

Also by BRYN JORDAN

THE BURNING OF THE BAR-K-RAE

RENEGADE GUNS

by
BRYN • JORDAN

*MASTER
THRILLER
WESTERN*



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CHAPTER I

MACE KELLY said sourly, "If it wasn't for being my cousin, I would feel inclined to plug you, Ted, right where you stand."

The speaker was a big man. Smooth muscles rippled beneath his blue silk shirt. His sudden movement ended with his laying hard, brown hands on the blue-black butts of holstered guns.

On his left was Hank Kelly, on his right his other brother, Ralph. Behind them was the long bar-counter of the Lucky Girl Saloon.

Smiling, Ted Kelly faced his stern-featured cousins. His green eyes danced with mischief. His sense of fun was seldom dormant. Recklessness was his chief characteristic, a trait that was somehow epitomised in the slight sideways twist of an otherwise well-shaped nose.

Mace Kelly's grim countenance softened. He said, "Conblast it, Ted, ain't you ever going to grow up and be your age?"

Ted Kelly's expression sobered. "Not if it means starting a range war for nothing, Mace," he drawled.

"A range war for nothing ! Goshamighty, listen to him !" Mace Kelly released his Colt-butts,

indulged in a gesture that held much of affection and was wholly resigned. His brothers took their cue from him. Hank shrugged his shoulders. Ralph folded muscular arms.

The bar-tender moved along the counter at a signal from Ted. The bullet-headed man in the apron was heartily glad that the fighting Kellys were not about to explode into violent feud.

Nearing fifty, Mace Kelly owned the Treble 3. Lord of the Crossed Arrow, Hank Kelly was ten years his junior. Ralph Kelly, who was thirty-five, ran the Diamond J.

Physically, the brothers were solid, chunky men. Loyal, honest and hard-working, their approach to life was simple, lacked subtlety.

Mercurial by comparison, Ted was twenty-five, and of lighter build. Nevertheless, he was wiry and active as the proverbial panther.

Drinks were set up on the counter. Ralph Kelly reached out for his glass, remarked, "Here's how, Ted—and maybe we can now discuss this doggone business like we was four quiet and sensible people."

Ted grinned. "Waal, let me air my views, and when I'm finished there won't be no call to lock horns—maybe."

He went on, uninterrupted, "Sudden Range has always been cow country, but now sheep are on the way. You bimbos want to pitch into Seth Peabody 'thout warning. I reckon it would pay to

wait. Breathe a word in his ear 'fore it gets to shooting. Ain't no telling but what he could be a right decent *hombre*."

Ted broke off, to roll himself a cigarette. Mace filled and lit his pipe. Ralph held a match to a black cigar. Hank produced a plug of tobacco, bit a piece from it, began methodically to chew.

Save for the apron, the quartette had the bar to themselves. The apron had retired out of earshot. Ted went on to say, "I don't like sheep any more than you do, nor I don't cotton to range war. Small scraps is okay, but a full-size shindig. . . . Ain't no betting who will or won't be ruined 'fore the thing is through."

Ted paused again. It occurred to him that he was not putting much of a case, and that he was making scant impression on his audience of three.

Mace spoke. "Be ruined if we allow them danged woollies to roam around here, there and yonderly."

Ted nodded. "Give you that, but why should they roam? Peabody has bought himself some considerable a large spread. Raise all the sheep he needs to on it. No call for him to let his flocks wander on our sections, not so far as I can see."

Hank spat accurately into the nearest cuspidor. "Conblast it, you should know snoozers better'n that. Heck, sheepmen and cowmen ain't ever been good neighbours, and nor they ever will."

Ted sighed. He was butting his head against a

brick wall. There could be no overcoming the instinctive prejudices of the other three.

Mace touched a square chin with blunt fingers. "Ted, I figure you have always been too kind-hearted a guy. This Peabody has acquired the Old Lazy S, and he could keep his lousy sheep on it. But he won't. No, sir, the stinking critturs will soon be all over—poisoning the grazing for cattle wherever they doggone go."

Ted pondered, and pondering, felt depressed. Perhaps Mace Kelly was in the right of it. Perhaps Seth Peabody was hard and unreasoning. Perhaps a destructive range war was inevitable.

Mace interrupted Ted's meditations. "There's only one way to play this game. Call a meeting of the Ranchers' Association, all combine and go to intercept this conblasted Peabody. Give the swine an ultimatum. Yeah, he either goes back to where he comes from, or is blown with his sheep to hell."

Ted pulled a face. Conversely, Hank and Ralph grunted their approval.

Ted resumed his musing. Mace, Hank and Ralph were representative of cattlemen in general. The other Sudden Range ranchers would line up behind them, ride with their crews to challenge Peabody. If Peabody refused to be intimidated, then. . . ? The first major battle of what could easily develop into a long and costly feud.

The affair would run to pattern. Cowboys would die, and sheep-herders. Both sides would import

hired killers. Bad men and outlaws would flock into the district. Ricks would burn. Ranch buildings. As bitterness increased between the opposing factions, innocent sheep and cattle would be slaughtered wantonly.

• Ralph tapped Ted on the forearm. "Do you string along with us when we go to see off Peabody and his low yahoos?"

Ted delayed his answer. Hank asserted, "Be best for you to use your savvy. Yeah, will surely pay you to."

Still Ted was silent. Mace growled in irritation, "Judas Priest! What in tarnation is holding you back from agreeing to help buck this dirty, low snoozer?"

Ted smiled, and the smile was boyish. "Not sure I savvy, but, if you know, Mace, then do tell a poor feller."

CHAPTER II

TED's dun gelding cantered out of a deep arroyo and on to level ground. He reined in his mount, pulled out Bull Durham and papers to fashion a cigarette, with one long leg cocked lazily over his saddle-horn.

He saw another rider approaching, a figure of grace and symmetry. The newcomer was a girl.

When she halted her chestnut mare within easy distance, Ted touched the brim of his Stetson, uttered a laconic, "Howdy, ma'am."

Iris Peabody replied to the greeting with a pleasant, "Good afternoon."

For a while the couple studied each other in silence. Ted was enchanted by corn-coloured hair peeping beneath a brown felt hat that was plumed with a cock's feather. He was conscious of a tempting mouth, of a nose that was fascinating, realised that he was gazing into eyes that were green as his own, though of a shade darker hue.

Iris thought Ted a good-looking man. She was attracted by his high cheek-bones, sun-fanned skin, his firm line of lips and jaw.

Away beyond Iris a mass of men and animals moved on the grassy plain. Ted pointed. "I'm

looking for the Peabody outfit, ma'am. Seems I've found it. Is it something to do with you?"

Iris nodded. "Yes, Seth Peabody is my father."

"Do you reckon he'd be willing to palaver with a rousy cattleman?" Ted grinned disarmingly.

Iris laughed. "I expect so. I'll take you to him anyway."

Ted's dun gelding kept pace easily with the chestnut mare. Riding beside Iris, Ted wondered just how big a fool he was to attempt single-handed to avert a range war.

The flocks of Seth Peabody were vast. Some two hundred herders were with the sheep. Mexicans for the most part, they none the less looked capable of giving a good account of themselves with rifle and revolver.

Ted pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. If his cousins and the other ranchers of Sudden Range issued ultimatums to Seth Peabody, they were likely to bite off more than they could chew.

Seth Peabody and his men evidently intended to camp for the night. Gleaming white in the late afternoon sunlight, tents of various sizes were dotted here and there.

Iris dismounted before the biggest. Ted followed suit. An enquiring expression on his stern countenance, an exceptionally tall man advanced to meet the pair.

Iris said, "This gentleman wants a word with you, father."

Peabody offered a powerful hand. Accepting it, Ted drawled, "Hope we're going to stay friendly. Glad to know you, Mr. Peabody."

"I'm Ted Kelly, of the B-Slash-N," he added. "I'm here 'thout credentials sort of—what you might name an unofficial ambassador."

"Go on, Mr. Kelly," Peabody invited. His eyes were hard. A certain grimness was apparent in his manner.

Ted was frank. "Could be there's trouble brewing," he said. "Tall trouble. I don't want that. Occurred to me that you don't especially want it either."

Peabody's eyebrows became a thin, straight line. "I have no use for trouble, but I never run away from it. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yeah, as crystal. But listen while I tell you." Ted's eyes twinkled.

He mentioned no names, but explained that the ranchers of Sudden Range feared the effect on their industry of an invasion by sheep.

"Been some wild talk," he continued, "which same wild talk alarmed me quite a lot. When hot-heads go on the prod, there is apt to be much fighting. In the long run, only folk to benefit are rustlers, hoot-owls and such."

Peabody frowned. Ted concluded, "Rode here to see you off my own bat. Could maybe pour oil on the troubled waters. Be a relief to the

Ranchers' Association to learn you got the makings of a good neighbour."

"I'm willing to be that, but, if I am pushed around for nothing!" Peabody shook his head.

"Just so," Ted assented. "If it can be arranged there is no trespassing by either side, then there need be no sort of ruckus."

Peabody unbent. "You aren't afraid to speak your mind. Iris and I are about to eat. Mr. Kelly, do you care to sit down to a meal with us?"

Ted glanced round at Iris. "You don't have to ask me twice. Is it yeah? You bet," he said.

The moon was high in the heavens when Ted and the dun gelding left the Peabody camp. Allowed to set its own pace, the dun chose a leisurely jiggle. With pleasant memories to divert him, Ted drew with placid enjoyment at a cigarette.

The young rancher dreamed of eyes that were green, and of an alluring mouth. Physical charm. A pleasant nature. Iris. The name of a flower. The name of a girl more to be desired than any bloom—however pretty—to be found on the end of a stalk.

Ted wrinkled the nose that was out of the true. "Gee hokey, but I've fallen in love at last," he reflected. "At first sight, too. Now ain't that the hell of a note?"

He grinned. No use to evade the issue. Iris Peabody had taken swift possession of his heart.

Ted sighed. Abandoning his tranquil reverie, he forced himself to consider the question of whether there was going to be a range war or not.

So far as concerned Seth Peabody, the mission undertaken on impulse had proved a success. Peabody was fair and honest. He had promised without hesitation to ensure that his sheep were prevented from straying on to neighbouring spreads.

That was fine. But the ranchers of Sudden Range. They might be less accommodating. Ted blew out his cheeks.

Mace, Hank and Ralph Kelly were straight-forward men. It was possible to make them see reason—if you tried hard enough.

But there were others. One in particular had an axe to grind. Ted's lips tightened. There existed no affection between himself and Curt Teesdale, of the Triple X.

Teesdale had long made a habit of grazing his cattle on the lush sections of the Lazy S. He had no legal right to do so, but he was unlikely to take kindly to the notion of being dispossessed.

Curt Teesdale was a gifted speaker. There was no sense denying that he was a popular figure in the Sudden Range district.

Then there was Lance Harder, the pale-faced owner of the Running Maverick. No one liked

Harder much, but he was the type that could not be ignored. A mysterious personality in some respects, he radiated power. Unpredictable, too. No telling which way he would jump, wherein he resembled the cat in the adage.

• Still, Curt Teesdale was the certain menace. He would want to wage war on Peabody. Such a war would endanger Iris. Ted rested a clenched fist on his saddle-horn.

“Could end with Curt or me in Boothill,” he reflected grimly. “Yeah, wouldn’t be difficult for us to tangle fatal twine.”

CHAPTER III

THE Lucky Girl Saloon was crowded with ranchers. Their local association meeting was about to commence when Ted shouldered his way through the bat-wing doors.

The late arrival was the target for stares of various kinds. Most were friendly, some indifferent, others curious, and some there were that were frankly hostile.

Mace Kelly occupied the presidential chair at a table in the centre of the room. "Howdy, Ted?" he said to his cousin. "Got to thinking you wasn't coming. Glad you made it after all."

Ted halted, hands in pockets. "Never intended not to be here for a moment," he drawled.

Mace nodded, gabbled through the minutes of the last session. These were accepted by a unanimous vote. Mace said, "First item on today's agenda 'is. . . . Waal, anyone needing to be told?"

"Dirty sheep, and stinking snoozers," said a voice. A low growl of anger followed on the harsh laughter which ensued.

Mace said, "Curt Teesdale wants to put the case to you. I am inviting him to do so. He has gone

into this matter considerable, and is tolerable waal informed."

Teesdale stepped up to the table, turned to face his audience, to a ripple of applause.

What he said was convincing, and even a sceptical Ted was aware of the magnetism in Teesdale's light blue eyes. Moreover, Teesdale undoubtedly had the sympathy of his hearers. By speaking first, he had captured the initiative. Ted began to feel dismayed.

Teesdale emphasised points with a stabbing finger. "I don't have to tell you fellers what danged woollies mean to a range. They crop the grass to nothing, poison it for cow-critturs—burn their pesky hides! Gents, we ain't standing for it, though maybe there is two-three present with peaceful notions. Said peaceful notions won't get us no place. We got to fight. We will fight. Mace here wants to give the Peabody jasper an ultimatum. I ask myself a question instead. Do we have to handle sheepmen gentle? What's wrong with going out in a bunch to chase Peabody and his filthy sheep right off Sudden Range?"

Pausing, Teesdale tapped the butt of a holstered Colt. About to resume, his words were drowned by a howl of acclaim.

Heavy boots stamped to add to the clamour. One or two excited ranchers discharged revolvers into the floor-boards.

At last the din subsided. Mace Kelly said,

"Seems like a vote ain't necessary. Anyone want to yammer 'gainst the motion 'fore I set her down as carried."

"Yeah, I do," Ted said quietly. Strolling up to the table, and with hands still in pockets, he confronted the silent and astonished crowd.

Mace Kelly was uneasy. "Hey, Ted, I reckon you mean waal, but this ain't the time to air them soft-hearted opinions of yours."

"Just where you're wrong," Ted countered drily. "My views are hard-headed and not soft-hearted a-tall."

Mace Kelly shrugged resignedly. "Goldurn it, Ted, if you ain't as obstinate as a team of flaming mules."

Ted grinned. Green eyes twinkling, he began his speech in calm and unhurried tones.

There came no interruptions. Curt Teesdale and the unpredictable Lance Harder apart, because of his reckless courage and proved good nature, he was liked and respected throughout the length and breadth of Sudden Range.

Avoiding sentiment, he stressed the general ruin that might result from a hard-fought feud. He went on to describe his visit to the Peabody camp. Ensued a surprised murmur. He lifted an appealing hand.

"Was impulse led me to do it," he explained. "Glad I went, 'cause this Peabody client is willing to be reasonable and keep his woollies off our

range. Is even agreeable to fence the critturs in. I would say he is a straight-up *hombre*, with no inclinations to tread on his neighbours' corns."

Another ripple of surprised murmurs. Ted appealed successfully for silence again.

"Don't believe I'm scarified to any extent," he resumed. "Don't calculate either that I'm a blind fool. Peabody will scrap—if he has to. Could be we would win. Would be hard going, though. When it was over would be no shortage of empty saddles on Sudden Range."

"Is surely up to you," Ted concluded. "Be quite sound to vote on it—now you have heard all sides."

Before anyone else in the room could speak, Teesdale strode angrily up to Ted and gripped him by the arm. "What you want to poke your nose in for?" he asked. "Conblast you for interfering when I got everyone worked up to the point of doing what is best for Sudden Range!"

"Says you!" Ted retorted. With a deft twist, he freed his arm.

Teesdale thrust out a brutal jaw. His light blue eyes became merest slits. With his personal dislike of Ted in the ascendant, the Triple X rancher was beside himself with rage.

"Side Peabody, would you? Anyone would figure you was a lousy snoozer yourself!" Teesdale snarled.

Ted was stung to irritation. "You go to

Gehenna," he said. "You got a reason for being so anxious to fight. When Peabody takes over, you savvy you'll have to give up grazing your herds on Lazy S land."

"You're a liar, Kelly! I want to fight because I got guts. You want to dodge it because you're no better'n a stinking coward."

Ted smacked Teesdale across the face. With the marks of fingers on his left cheek, Teesdale stepped backwards, clawed downwards at his holstered forty-fives.

Ted concentrated on one gun instead of two. Incredibly fast, his movements merged into a bewildering blur of speed.

Ted fired first by the veriest fraction. Teesdale stiffened, swayed for an instant, crashed to the boards. Ted gazed down at his fallen opponent. Teesdale was dead, and the red star disfiguring his forehead showed how he had died.

Pandemonium took possession of the Lucky Girl Saloon. Men argued and shouted. The members of the Sudden Range Ranchers' Association began to quarrel among themselves.

Ted stood pensive and troubled, every vestige of humour gone from his eyes. He knew great remorse. True, Teesdale had left him no alternative, but he was no hardened gunman and hated to take human life under any circumstances.

He woke to the realisation that the saloon was no longer filled with ~~noise~~. He looked up. Joe

Watson, Sheriff of Milton and District, was standing statuesque just inside the bat-wing doors.

The hush continued. Watson marched straight up to Ted. "So you rubbed out Curt Teesdale—huh?" the newcomer enquired.

"Guess so," Ted conceded. "Ain't what I wanted, but I had to. You see, I slapped him on the face and he reached for his guns."

"At so?" Watson spoke from the side of a thin-lipped mouth. "You wouldn't go to belt him for nothing. Any objections to telling me how come you quarrelled?"

"Nary an objection." Ted told his story in dull and apathetic tones.

Watson was a big man. The badge on his red shirt was brightly polished. He wore corduroys thrust into knee-high boots of calf hide.

"Kelly here told me the truth?" With grey eyes that were the best feature of a craggy countenance he examined the subdued spectators. No one spoke until Lance Harder said, "Was a case of self-defence, Watson. In some ways I am sorry to have to tell you that. Hate to have to exonerate any man who is friend to a lousy sheepman and his tarnation herders."

Watson checked a mutter of assent by raising a large and imperious hand. "Don't want nobody's opinions on sheepmen," he said. "When I do, I'll ask for them. Just now I'm concerned

with a killing. Ted Kelly, you're taking a stroll with me—to the calaboose."

Mechanically, Ted followed Watson out of the saloon. Watson halted on the board side-walk, took Ted by the arm.

"Okay," Ted said dejectedly. "I will go quiet. You want I should hand you my guns?"

"Not to any extent," was the dry response. "Could be *you'll* need them later. Bet Harder turns the Ranchers' Association against you. By grab, but listen to the yammering that has broken out in that doggone saloon."

CHAPTER IV

THE light of the twin-burner oil-lamp with the smoke-grimed chimney somehow accentuated the corpse-like pallor of Lance Harder's saturnine countenance. Across the rough deal table, Sneed Bellamy, owl-hoot and renegade, narrowed eyes that were hard as agate, and toyed with a spade beard.

There was nothing palatial about the Running Maverick ranch house. A stout building, well adapted for defence, it was crudely furnished. Utility was the keynote. The living-room was like all the rest, dirty and dusty, suggesting that it was the abode of men whose habits were not refined.

Bellamy said, "Do tell me more. So you opine things is shaping some the way we want them to move?"

"I'll say," assented Harder, "thanks to a coupla fools. Curt Teesdale, he sets the ball rolling, then Ted Kelly horns in to spoil his game. Teesdale turns raw and goes for his guns after Kelly had slapped him—which was tant-a-mount to suicide."

"And that set the Ranchers' 'Sociation considerable against Ted Kelly?" Bellamy enquired.

"Yeah, plenty, Sneed, plenty. What Kelly done sorter reminded them cattlemen they don't admire snoozers a-tall. Might have got round to notions of lynching Kelly, but that side-winder, Joe Watson, walks in and carts Kelly off to the calaboose. Didn't arrest him for murder. There weren't no case. Kelly hits the grit soon after. Likely Watson advised him to tote hisself outa town."

"Could be," Bellamy acquiesced. "Not that we give a dime for ranchers with two-bit spreads. You say more 'bout the meeting. You got cause to reckon the guns will be popping soon?"

Harder stroked a thin, dark line of moustache. "Waal, I spilled my piece when Kelly was gone. You can bet them ranchers listened. Time I'd finished, they was itching to ride out and blow Peabody and his outfit to smithereens."

Bellamy helped himself to whisky, set the bottle down on the table again. "Lance, you're a clever bustard. The range war is liable to be tolerable tough. Will give us the chance we're wanting to buy winning chips in the game."

"And how. When both sides fought themselves to a standstill, we play Buttinsky. My pay-roll shows forty fine scrappers. How many slug-slammers at a pinch can you raise?"

"'Bout thirty, Lance. All good boys, who have for years been haunting the dim trails. Ain't enough, though—not by a long chalk. But I got

a idea. We could have the lead-throwing took care of by someone else, if you ain't too squeamish to employ Injuns."

Harder's black eyebrows shot up towards his hair. "Sneed, you care to elucidate? You been peddling liquor on the Reservation again?"

"Why not?" was the untroubled answer. "Might interest you to know Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse love me like a brother. Them two may not be young, but they ain't wore out. No, Sir, and the rot-gut recalls them frequent to memories of their scalp-chasing days."

Harder pulled a face, was silent, watching Bellamy, his head to one side. He was under no illusion, saw quite plainly what his confederate had in mind.

No inconvenient scruples ever hindered the Running Maverick rancher. Expediency was his god. All he ever required of fate was to deal him an unbeatable hand.

"You allow them Sioux would be agreeable to jump the Reservation, Sneed?"

"Would do it instanter, if so be they was provided with proper guns."

Harder reflected deeply. There had been no Indian trouble in the West for a long term of years. It seemed that such troubles were over, and yet. . . Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse had once been famous fighters. The spirit of adventure was not dead in their race. Many young bucks

would be ready to follow the veterans if they elected to ride the war-trail.

Firewater would convert them into yelling madmen. Drink-inflamed, they would sweep across Sudden Range in a destructive wave.

The scheme had advantages. Harder was guilty of a crafty smile.

Noting it, Bellamy smiled craftily in his turn. "Can see you allow my notion is worth giving a whirl."

"Sneed, I'm prepared to admit you could have something. Bet you have it all figured out, too. You best give me the de-tails."

"Be a pleasure, Lance," Bellamy exhibited a real grasp of essentials, speaking of kegs of whisky, cases of rifles and ammunition, how they could be smuggled into the Low Hollow Reservation, and of quantities required.

Harder listened patiently, tapping on gold-crowned teeth with blunt finger-nails. "It's a wow," was his verdict. "I surely got to hand it to you this time, Sneed."

Too astute to overrate it, Bellamy shrugged the flattery aside. "Will need a doggone good sched-ule," he said. "Won't do to have them Sioux on the prod 'fore we give the word."

"Sure won't," responded Harder. "Should be easy to fix. Any case, the range war ain't likely to bust open for another three-four days."

"Y'see," he went on, "the fatal ruckus 'tween Kelly and Teesdale was responsible for a few things.* To kick off with, the funeral and the inquest occasioned a hold-up kinder. What is more, though they got to hate his guts more than somewhat, them ranchers was smart enough to recollect the warning Ted Kelly had whispered promiscuous in their flapping ears."

Harder paused to fill a glass with neat whisky, ~~then~~, " 'Bout Peabody being so strong," he resumed. "Yea, the ranchers allowed it would be plumb silly to go slam-bang at him 'fore they had got theirselves properly organised."

Bellamy nodded sagely. "And Peabody is now on the Lazy S. Was there with all his flaming sheep when I cut through his territory on my way to you this afternoon."

Harder bit the end from a cigar. He applied a match to it. Smoke that was blue and pungent floated up to the ceiling.

Bellamy began to scratch among the whiskers of his spade beard. "You know something, Lance? Them Mex herders of Peabody's looked a ornery bunch. Wouldn't surprise me was they to knock the stuffing out of the Sudden Range cowboys."

"Nor me, Sneed, not to any extent. Especially as I won't be there with my tough hellions."

Bellamy cocked a knowing eyebrow. "Going to duck out when the shindig starts—eh? That way

you won't have no trouble, will wind up listed 'mong the best behaved li'l boys?"

Harder laughed. "Yea, something like that. Wonder which side of the fence Joe Watson will squat. He don't like sheep, but will depend who starts the shooting, I suppose."

"Shouldn't have thought he would signify." Bellamy helped himself to one of Harder's rank cigars. "And he won't, nor won't some others when the Sioux get on the prowl."

Harder said, "Will work a treat, Sneed. Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse will do all the killing we want." He winked. "Won't be able to do for the Running Maverick though. Me and the hands will be lucky enough to be overlooked by them murderous feather-dusters."

Bellamy nodded a thought absently. "When the scrapping is over, you will be king-pin of this neck o' the woods. Makes me wonder sort of. Why in heck you so anxious to be lord of Sudden Range?"

"Swear I will tell you one day." Harder chuckled. "Bet your bottom dollar that when I do, Sneed, you will be knocked plumb cock-eyed."

CHAPTER V

TED saw that the long-disused Lazy S ranch house had already been repaired considerably since the coming of the Peabodys. As he swung down from the back of the dun gelding, Iris ran out to meet him, with a warmly welcoming smile.

"It's nice to see you again, Mr. Kelly." She offered a dainty hand. "And nice to have met with no opposition so far. Father and I were delighted. Have you brought us some news?"

"Bad, I'm afraid," Ted said slowly. "Sorry to be blunt, but I got to see your father quickly." He added sombrely, "I've been called some mighty harsh things just lately, yeah, including traitor. Guess that's robbed me of any dip-lom-acy I ever had, and given me the urge to earn the last of them names."

"Oh," said Iris, and then, "Here comes my father now—just over that rise."

Ted sighed. Iris heard the sigh, glimpsed recent suffering in his now far from twinkling eyes.

"What is wrong, Mr. Kelly?" she asked. "Do tell me—please."

Ted related his unfortunate experiences, concluding, "Didn't want to rub out Teesdale, but

there it was. Ever since, I been a outcast, despite the inquest verdict, which was justifiable homicide. Has hurt some, but what hurts worse is. . . . Don't look like I can keep 'trouble away from Sudden Range after all."

Seth Peabody arrived on a chestnut gelding, levered himself to the ground. Ted repeated his story, wound up on this occasion with, "The dog-gone fools aim to attack you without warning—thanks to Lance Harder, the low hellion. Am sure of that, but can't say when. Is up to you now to see that you aren't caught off guard."

"I understand," said Peabody, and, "Thank you. Iris, take Mr. Kelly into the house and give him some re-fresh-ment. I will surely be with you when I have set the men to carrying out certain orders."

Peabody mounted and rode away. Turning to Iris, Ted remarked, "I would admire considerable to attend to my cayuse."

"Of course, Mr. Kelly." Iris clapped her hands together. In response, a lithe Mexican peon hurried up, to lead the dun gelding to the stables, on instructions from the girl.

Ted was presently left alone in the Peabody's living-room. He rolled himself a cigarette. Evidence of feminine taste was all round him. He decided that the Peabodys had brought the dainty furniture with them in covered wagons.

Soon the furniture might be bullet-shattered.

He moved moodily across to the window, gazed through it at the world outside.

The Peabody dwelling stood on an eminence. So far as Ted's vision would penetrate was smooth and open range.

The scene was one of ordered action. Sheep were being collected and driven north. Men evidently destined for the rôle of scout were fanning out on wiry mustangs. A born tactician himself, Ted saw what was in the wind, nodded approval of Peabody's plans.

Iris entered with a tray. Ted sat down at the table, to eat with appreciation, in spite of his morbid mood.

The meal over, he fashioned another cigarette. Iris sank into a chair on his left. She said, "Perhaps you can guess how grateful we are to you, Mr. Kelly—even if I can't put it into words."

Ted sipped coffee just to his taste. And tobacco had recovered its soothing effect, for the first time for days.

Iris said in her gentle voice, "There's something else, Mr. Kelly. I know just how you must feel at losing all your friends."

"I feel like kicking myself for being so soft." Ted hesitated, then gave way to the impulse to unburden himself to the sympathetic girl.

"Never have taken kindly to killing, and Curt Teesdale haunts me some," he averred. "For the rest, waal, I lost my sense of humour. Ain't ever

been treated like a bad smell before. Lovely dove, but even my hands have walked off the B-Slash-N and left me alone."

"Oh, but how dreadful," said Iris. Her kind eyes filled with tears.

Ted's mouth slipped into a lop-sided grin. "Don't know why I'm talking to you like this, but maybe it is a big relief to moan. You see, I've always been a reckless feller, the sort who figures to be popular wheresoever he happens to sheenanick around. With men. And women was some friendly. Not that I encouraged them. Counted myself too happy-go-lucky to want to be tied."

Iris was touched. Her heart ached for this man who was no longer happy-go-lucky. She saw in him the eternal boy, the male child who sulked when wounded, was—although he would never admit it—anxious to be mothered.

There was danger, too, for Ted Kelly. Reckless by nature and inclination, he was the type who in time of trouble would turn to lawless ways.

"Mr. Kelly, please, you mustn't—be too harsh with your friends."

Ted considered the admonition. He was beginning to feel less sullen, had no doubt that the change was due to the comforting influence of the girl. Nevertheless, he clung obstinately to his grievance, was determined not to abandon the sense of injury he had nursed for many days.

"My friends are through with me," he asserted, "and I'm likewise through with my friends."

Iris found herself at a loss. Before she could frame any suitable answer, hoof-beats sounded, subsided. A matter of seconds later, her father was in the room.

"All seen to," he said briskly. "The sheep collected in one spot. Scouts out in every direction. Guess the Sudden Range ranchers will be mighty lucky if they catch us bending."

The big man exuded confidence. Nothing detracted from it, not even his perpetually wrinkled forehead, or the crow's-feet at the corners of his steady grey eyes.

But Ted was looking at Iris. He thought, "Wonder what's come to me. She's even sweeter than I remembered. Don't ever recollect before dreaming about a girl."

Peabody said, "Mr. Kelly, you have me worried. Do your fellow-ranchers know what you've done? I calculate it would grieve me to learn you were in any danger through doing me a good turn."

The implied challenge acted on Ted like a tonic. He was contemptuous of threats, from whatever source. Suddenly ready to fight at the drop of a hat, a ghost of the old devil-may-care twinkle was back in his eyes.

"Devil take them," he said grimly. "They can have all the trouble they want, if so be they come

hunting for me with a chip on their shoulders."

"Hum." Peabody caressed the square chin distinguished by a cleft. "Too many for one man to tangle with. Do you figure you can slip back to your ranch undetected, or do you think they can have guessed you have come here?"

Ted shrugged. "Waal, not being on speaking terms, I haven't told them, but. . . . There is Lance Harder. That low snake could have had me watched. Be like him, but, me, I don't greatly care."

Iris and her father exchanged understanding glances. Iris said, "Isn't there a chance left of preventing this awful war?"

Ted laughed without mirth. "Just one," he said. "Let someone slip a bullet into Lance Harder."

CHAPTER VI

MACE KELLY led the cavalcade. On his left rode Ralph. On his right was Hank. There was nothing of content in the expressions of the three brothers.

The trail wound through a gap in a grass-covered bench. Just beyond, a willow-fringed creek gleamed in the sun. Cow-ponies began to whicker at sight of the water.

Mace Kelly halted his party. The day was hot. Both ranchers and cowboys were glad of a chance to rest on their way to savage war.

That was all there was to it. The force representing the Sudden Range Ranchers' Association harboured no foolish impressions. Seth Peabody and his herders would fight, and fight hard. Many horses would roam riderless before the battle was over.

The three Kellys took up a position a little apart from the rest. The clan spirit was strong among them. Added to that, Mace Kelly was not the man to relinquish the respect he considered due to him in his role of leader.

Seated on the ground, he relaxed. Pipe in mouth, he toyed pensively with the slide-cord of his sombrero.

Ralph Kelly said, "Too bad Lance Harder has been laid low."

"And how, Ralph," Hank Kelly agreed. "Going to miss his tough-shell rannyhans 'fore this show is through."

Privately, Mace Kelly was in accord with his brothers, but held his peace. A worried man, he sank into a stern reverie.

Lance Harder's absence was serious. Even more serious was the absence of the hard-bitten Running Maverick crew.

Instead of arriving at the agreed rendezvous with his outfit, Harder had sent a messenger to explain that he was ill. Questioned, the messenger had expressed the profane opinion that his boss was too bad to sit a saddle. Questioned further, he had stated emphatically that neither he nor any other Running Maverick hand was willing to serve in a range war except under the direct leadership of Harder.

Mace Kelly had no reason to doubt the story. Harder was no physical coward. After the dead Teesdale, he was the prime mover against Seth Peabody, wherefore, it was absurd to imagine that he would back down from the affair.

As for the Running Maverick riders, they had always kept themselves to themselves. At best, they could only be accused of excessive loyalty to their employer.

Ralph Kelly consulted a silver turnip of a

watch. "Twen'y minutes since we stopped," he said. "Be on our way again soon. Dunno though as we wouldn't be sensible to post-pone this shindig till Lance Harder is better."

Mace Kelly heard the words, and they stung him. "Goldurn it, but Lance Harder ain't the hull world!" he commented acidly.

"As you say, Mace." Ralph Kelly hunched his shoulders. "Okay, we can manage. Wonder if this Peabody is expecting us to pay him a call."

"Reckon he is," Hank Kelly interjected. "The visit he had from that ijtut Ted would likely cause him to suspicion something *muy pronto*."

Hank Kelly sighed. The subject he had raised was a sore one. Ted was a Kelly when all said and done. The slur he had brought on the family name affected his three cousins keenly.

"Where is the young fool now that his crew has walked out on him?" Ralph Kelly wanted to know.

"Sulking somewheres for a million. Being an outcast must have upset him considerable." This time, Hank Kelly was the speaker.

Mace Kelly became aware of a faint stir of conscience. To subdue it, he said gruffly, "This is where we hit the grit. Conblast Ted. He ain't in the only place he should be in, which is right here."

"Having salivated Curt, he weren't 'zactly ever invited," Hank Kelly began, only to have his

opinions drowned when Mace rose to his feet and bellowed orders in a voice of fog-horn quality. As a result of his loud commands, the force he led was soon again on its way.

There was still a long distance to travel to the Lazy S. The cavalcade assumed arrow-head formation. Scouts were sent on ahead. Jokes and laughter were in even shorter supply than they had been before.

Winchesters were loosened in saddle-scabbards. Hands touched the cold butts of holstered revolvers. Hard eyes scanned the terrain in front. Every rise in the ground was suspect, every arroyo or dry wash an object of deep suspicion. The cowboys and ranchers feared ambush, placing only half reliance in the skill of their scouts, as is so often the way with those on the verge of war.

Nothing untoward occurred, however. Mile after mile was left behind. The tension decreased slightly, as the ground levelled to smooth plain, offering no adequate protection for would-be dry-gulchers.

Some miles farther on, however, the landscape underwent a change. Mace Kelly's party descended a slope towards a fertile valley. The slope ahead was heavily timbered, as also were the slopes to left and to right.

Below him, his scouts were circling in evident indecision. Above them, backs to the trees and

drawn up in buffalo-formation, was a large array of well-mounted and heavily-armed men.

No mistaking the velvet pants and the silk shirts of the Mexican sheep-herders, nor their steeple-shaped sombreros. Mace Kelly swore. His commando had ridden into a trap. •

To retire would be undignified. To charge up the slope ahead would be to invite disaster. Any attempt by the cowboy force to find cover among the timber on either side would entail a longish upward climb, rendered more hazardous by an exposed flank.

One thing was essential, however. Standing up in his stirrups, Mace Kelly shouted the orders which brought his warriors to a halt.

The scouts drifted up towards the sullen main body. Ralph Kelly complained, "With all that wood behind them, them low yahoos certainly has us out on a limb."

"Should have went to the Lazy S some other way," Hank Kelly grunted. "Yeah, got the drop on us, them snoozers. Say. . . . Holy cow, here come three of the ornery sons with a flag of truce."

Field-glasses reposed on Mace Kelly's chest, supported by a leather cord draped about his neck. He focused the glasses, whistled. "One is a greaser. Other for a million is Peabody, and . . . Judas Priest!—if the third feller ain't Ted."

Hank and Ralph Kelly were duly dismayed. Others present had overheard Mace Kelly. Sundry ranchers and cowboys registered their displeasure in vigorous Western oaths.

Half-way down the opposing slope, Seth Peabody, Ted and the sheep-herder reined in their mounts. Seth Peabody cupped his hands to his mouth, shouted, "Whoever is in charge, come up and palaver. Maybe we can settle this business without spilling blood."

There were murmurs of dissent among the more hot-headed of the cowboys and ranchers. Mace Kelly turned in his saddle, the back of his thick neck a dark red. "I'm jamrodding this party, and I aim to make *habla* with Peabody," he snapped.

It was then that the rifle cracked somewhere up among the trees on the right. The Mexican sheep-herder next to Seth Peabody rocked on his mustang. The flag of truce fell from his nerveless fingers. He pitched sideways, blood welling from a mortal wound in his breast.

With Ted close behind him, Peabody swung his chestnut in a swift half circle, urged it up the slope. His Mexicans galloped down to meet him, with carbines blazing, not one among them doubting that some rancher or cowboy had fired the treacherous shot.

Charged at by a determined enemy, the ranchers and cowboys were denied opportunity to

think. Nor had they the inclination to do so. They raised Winchesters to shoulders, squeezed triggers instead.

A smile on his bearded lips, Sneed Bellamy watched the battle develop. Both factions were strung out in line and manœuvring at terrific speed. Here and there a man was killed or wounded. Neither side showed signs of making for cover. Tempers were too much out of hand for caution. The shooting was continuous.

Bellamy was concealed among the topmost branches of a giant oak. His rifle slung across his shoulders, he began a calm and unhurried descent. Reaching the ground without mishap, he took a last glance at the fight that raged in the valley beneath.

His horse was tethered in cover not far away. He strolled in its direction, grinning wickedly to himself.

"I surely drew a lovely bead on that oiler with the flag," he mused. "Better'n plugging Peabody. My mazuma is on that jasper to keep his crowd on their toes and see the scrapping don't peter out too durn quick."

CHAPTER VII

SETH PEABODY had—by dint of strong personality—installed a sense of discipline in his herders, had impressed his authority on the few who were American, and on the many who were Mexican. Conversely, the cowboys and ranchers ostensibly commanded by Mace Kelly, were independent spirits, were, when the plain truth was faced, insubordinate.

Mace Kelly rode furiously among them. His endeavours to persuade them to resume arrow-head formation proved a dismal failure. His horse was shot from under him. Stunned by the fall, he was hoisted on to a rideless cow-pony by the faithful Ralph and Hank.

By then, Peabody had succeeded in organising his force into three columns. Two executed flank-ing movements. The third pressed stolidly forward in a frontal attack.

Assailed on either wing and in the centre, the cowboy-rancher army suffered many casualties. The inevitable happened. Brave though they were as individuals, thrown into confusion, they began to think in terms of every man for himself.

One or two galloped madly up the far slope

and out of the valley. Others followed. There ensued a hasty retreat within measurable distance of a general rout.

Still in three columns, Peabody's herders went after the fleeing enemy. Their wild yells could be heard even above the incessant shooting. Ted was surprised and pleased, therefore, when Peabody unexpectedly called off the pursuit.

It was not all done in a moment, but gradually the victorious herders returned to the valley. Peabody issued sharp orders. The injured were given attention, one or two badly wounded horses shot.

Peabody called a tall Mexican to him. "Carlos," he said, "take two men with you and go after the American *vaqueros*. Do not let them see you, but keep touch with them until you are certain they do not intend to return to attack our force."

"Si, *senor*." The Mexican saluted. Then, having chosen two companions, he swung up on to the back of his mustang, and departed at a rapid clip.

The reins of his dun gelding draped over an arm, Ted was near to Peabody. "I certainly have to hand it to you," he said.

Peabody sighed. "I sure hope they have learned their lesson. We want no more bloodshed."

"You're dern tooting." Ted rolled himself a cigarette. "Gee hokey, wonder who plugged the poor brute that was acting standard-bearer. Has me considerable puzzled. Wouldn't ever of

believed any Sudden Range puncher or cowman would have fired promiscuous at a flag of truce."

Peabody smiled thinly. "Mebbyso, but I calculate there is no denying one of them did."

"Looks that way," Ted assented, and to himself, "My grief-a-goshen, lay any money it weren't Hank, Ralph or Mace."

Saddened by the memory of his cousins, Ted drew reflectively at his cigarette. Peabody began to circulate among his herders. Ted felt more alone than he had ever felt before in his life.

To his own kind he was a pariah. He was not a sheepman by birth, training or inclination. He had to admit that in his present situation he was completely out of place.

He moved across to where a wounded cowboy was bandaging a punctured arm with a scarf. "You need help?" Ted queried. "Dirty traitor," the cowboy retorted, turned his head away and spat.

Ted went white beneath his tan. To such a low state had he fallen. He must get away and think things over. On impulse, he straddled the dun gelding, rode slowly up the adjoining slope.

Fate rather than its master guided the gelding to the foot of the giant oak from which Sneed Bellamy had fired the machiavellian shot. Ted's eyes were keen. For all his abstraction, he noted the expended cartridge case on the ground adjacent to his mount's off fore-hoof.

Alighting, he retrieved the object, held it in

strong, brown fingers, suspicion and bewilderment mingled on his sun-tanned face.

He looked up, to see broken twigs and sundry scratches on the bark of the oak. Someone had climbed it recently. Whoever had done so, had worn spurs. A hand pressed to the tree-trunk, Ted bent in minute scrutiny of the earth at its base.

The climber had dropped the last few yards, to conclude his descent. Now, what had he been doing up the tree? Not risking his neck for fun, for a certainty. But if he'd wanted to watch the battle in the valley, then. . . . Light came to Ted. He whistled. "Lovely dove," he muttered. "He shinned up the tree to shoot the poor Mex with the standard. No, wouldn't have had time. Must have been up there already. All the same, the betting is he killed that greaser galoot."

There could be no other explanation, or so it seemed to Ted.

Ted continued his conjectures. The shot from the tree had been fired with a purpose. What was that purpose? To prevent any chance of a peaceful settlement between Seth Peabody and the Sudden Range Ranchers' Association.

That suggested . . . ? Lance Harder. Everything pointed to the skulking sniper being one of Lance Harder's men.

Giving way to impulse, Ted began to follow Sneed Bellamy's tracks. It would be interesting to prove or disprove his theories. Besides, action

would provide him with an escape from his gloomy reflections.

For the nonce, there would be no more fighting. The defeated cattlemen would be slow to rally, might be even slower to renew the attack. Nor would Peabody force the issue. Leaving mounted pickets to guard against possible surprise, the sheepman would ride with the bulk of his force back to the Lazy S.'

Where Iris awaited her father. Iris. Himself mustn't dwell on Iris. The girl deserved a better fate than to be courted by a ruined outcast.

That's what he was. Ruined. An Ishmael. Only one course open to him. Sell the B-Slash-N when the trouble died down. Take whatever money it brought him. Make a fresh start somewhere else.

At this point in his morbid meditations, Ted arrived at the spot where Sneed Bellamy had mounted his horse. Unmistakable sign told the story. The trail left by Bellamy ran straight down among the trees, where damp earth recorded tell-tale hoof-marks.

Ted forked the dun gelding. The animal carried him slowly down the timber-clad slope.

At the foot, Ted reined in the gelding, swore. His task was no longer simple. From here on, his suddenly cagey quarry had trailed a blanket on the ground behind his mount.

That spelled laborious progress for anyone seeking to follow in his wake. Ted understood just

what it would mean. No more than an occasional crushed blade of grass to guide him, an undertaking that would give even an Indian tracker furiously to think.

North was the beginnings of a stretch of *malpais*. East the terrain was broken by coulees and arroyos. South was a pleasing prospect of luxurious grass.

Ted studied the problem of which direction. The sun was low in the heavens. It would soon be dark. He would have to consider camping for the night.

Unless he kept faith in the hunch that he was seeking one of Lance Harder's men. If he did that, he could ride through the night on a course that would eventually bring him to the Running Maverick.

Yes, that was the game he had to play. He tapped his gelding on the flank, to set it in motion. There was no need to hurry the creature. Ted steered south-eastwards at a steady clip.

He racked his brains, but could not remember to have seen Lance Harder during the fight. He had glimpsed his three cousins, but Lance Harder, no. Had Lance Harder let the Ranchers' Association down? He had been hot enough concerning Seth Peabody, but. . . . Harder was a cunning hellion, just the sort of double-crossing scoundrel to delight in making bullets for less artful men to shoot.

If he, Ted, found Lance Harder at home, and if

he ran across indications that one of Harder's tough crew had only just returned to the Running Maverick, then. . . . Ted wrinkled his brows. It was possible—allowing the mysterious sniper to be a Running Maverick hand—that the fellow would have abandoned his trail-covering activities somewhere along his homeward journey to the ranch.

What then? Inform the Sudden Range Ranchers' Association of Harder's duplicity? Or, tackle Harder with it direct?

The Ranchers' Association would have no truck with disgraced Ted Kelly. It would be better to clash with Harder, kill Harder in a gun-duel, even if the penalty was his own swift exit before the blazing Colts of Harder's loyal but rough outfit.

On the right was a skull-shaped boulder. As Ted passed it, a lariat hissed out at him. The noose settled about his body, pinioning his arms. He was hauled to the ground with a thud.

When he looked up, three men stood over him. He recognised Red Skelton, of the Triple Fork, Olly Griffin, of the Diamond Loop, and Tex Hardcastle, the hatchet-faced foreman of the Double Z.

There was light enough left to see that the two cowboys were scowling bleakly. Hardcastle bent forward, backhanded Ted across the mouth.

"You louse," he said resentfully. "You sold them low snoozers news that we was coming. You got to pay for that, Kelly. Yeah, come morning we surely aim to string you up."

CHAPTER VIII

TED'S wrists were lashed tightly before him. He was astride his dun gelding. The gelding stood nervously beneath a cottonwood. A lariat was secured to a lofty branch. The noose was about Ted's neck.

Skelton held the gelding by the bit-chain. Griffin was to the left of the animal, Hardcastle behind it, ready to slap it on the flank.

Hardcastle growled, "If you got any prayers to say, Kelly, you best get them said."

Ted was stiff and cramped from hours spent as a bound and helpless prisoner. He preserved the stony silence he had maintained throughout a sleepless night.

His captors, too, were drawn and hollow-eyed. They had not slept either. Ted reflected sardonically that conscience had kept the trio awake.

It seemed a shame to die on such a lovely morning. He had neither offered explanation, nor begged for mercy. Ted's mouth twisted. He decided cynically that it was too late to start.

He harboured no particular animosity against the men who were minded to send him to his death. Traitors and renegades were anathema in

Western eyes. He was prepared to admit that he might have contemplated similar action, similarly placed.

Skelton's nerves began to fray. "For crying out loud," he protested, "you going to let us swing you into eternity, Kelly, 'thout opening your trap?"

Still Ted stared stonily ahead of him. Griffin licked dry lips, muttered, "This rannyhan ain't human. Be best to get it over with."

Hardcastle tugged out a bandanna, mopped his brow. His hands were hot and clammy. He dried them as though with a towel. The Adam's-apple moved convulsively in his stringy neck.

Neither Ted nor his killers-to-be saw or heard the commanding figure on the Palamino emerge behind them from among the clump of cottonwoods. When they did at last become conscious of him, it was as if horse and rider had materialised suddenly from the earth at their feet.

Tall, thin to the point of emaciation, he held a blue-black Colt in either hand. His nose was curved and jutting. His narrowed eyes approximated to the hue of slate.

He said, "You three lynchers will oblige me by shucking your gun-belts."

"And if that cayuse moves a fraction," he added, "I surely intend to shoot."

Skelton retained his grip of the dun gelding's bit-chain, used his free hand to unbuckle his gun-

belt. Hardcastle and Griffin were as quick to disarm themselves. Their expressions sullen, they stared at the interrupter. "Untie that *hombre* and help him to the ground," the tall man said.

It was done. Lowered to a sitting position by Griffin and Hardcastle, Ted began industrious massage of cramped arms and legs. Turning green eyes on the stranger, "Thanks a million, pard," he said.

The newcomer slipped down from the Palamino. At his orders, Griffin, Hardcastle and Skelton lined up before him, with arms folded across their chests.

"I'm Dale Leander, and I never did hold with lynching." With smooth precision, the speaker holstered his Colts. "This ranny is no hoss-thief or rustler—'less my eyes deceive me more than somewhat. And you other guys look honest. Have I butted into a range war? Do tell me what goes on."

Hardcastle whistled. "Dale Leander—huh. You by any chance the cow detective was so famous when I was last in Texas?"

Dale Leander nodded. "Yeah, I hail from Texas, and I am a range detective."

Hardcastle relaxed. "Dunno what you're doing round here, and ain't surely none of my business. Okay, you stopped a lynching, and I ain't sorry. Didn't really fancy fixing Kelly there, though he has showed himself to be a pisen-mean snake."

"You surprise me," Leander commented. "Just what has he done?"

Hardcastle replied with a biased narrative, into which Skelton and Griffin interjected odd remarks. "So y'see the bustard sold us down the river," Hardcastle concluded.

Studying the crestfallen punchers, Leander decided that they resembled three naughty boys taken to task by a stern parent. There was no real vice in them, but it was evident that they believed themselves to be the possessors of a genuine grievance.

"Your brons are adjacent," Leander said mildly. "Why not pick up your artillery and ride to join your friends?"

"Okay, we will scam—and thank you." Hardcastle grinned sheepishly. "So long, Leander. Come along, fellers."

Neither Ted nor Leander spoke until the departing trio had ridden out of sight. Then, "Am plumb grateful to you," Ted averred. "I allow to have some feelings, even if I rate no higher than a crawling snake."

Charro jacket pushed back, Leander stood with hands resting lightly on his hips. "You don't much resemble the serpent class," he suggested. "There's two sides to every story. So far, I have only listened to one."

Ted managed to smile. "Waal, if you want it, here is my side of it," he began.

Save that he contented himself with too casual reference to Iris, his recital of events leading up to the attempted lynching was frank and candid enough. "So there you are, and you have the hull works now," was his final remark.

Leander toyed with the rhinestone clasp securing his spotted scarf in position, having pushed a silver-grey Stetson, around which was a rattle-snake skin band, to the black of his close-cropped head. "Hum, I'd say you was more sinned against than sinning," was his quiet verdict.

Ted rose to his feet, crossed to the dun gelding, patted the creature's smooth neck. "I've been guilty of plain damfoolery," he said drily. "I should have known better than to have rushed in where angels fear to tread."

"Guess I can't pretend to blame you, brother. And you've given me certain notions. This Lance Harder *hombre*—just what is he like?"

Ted was beginning to savour the delights of the day, to shed his gloom, to realise that even an outcast was better off alive on such a morning than dead. "A louse," he asserted presently. "A low yahoo. A side-winder. The shame of his mother. Lance Harder is pure carrion. Spleen-gutted vermin. I'll say the bustard stinks!"

Leander smiled. "You ain't too much in love with Harder, but, physically, what is he like?"

Ted's description of Harder was detailed and

unfriendly. The portrait was nevertheless a good one, even if frankly scurrilous.

While Ted retrieved his gun-belt and examined the Colts in the holsters, Leander stood musing and stroking his pointed chin.

Leander emerged from his reverie. "I would admire to take a surreptitious peep at this Lance Harder," he said. "You feel inclined to run in cahoots with me in this matter, or are you minded to go on playing lone wolf?"

Ted was surprised to find himself grinning broadly. "As to that, you want to remember your natural history," he said. "Lovely dove, but you ought to know. Heck, but when you save a man's life, you have him draped around your flaming neck for ever after."

CHAPTER IX

DALE LEANDER pressed a firm but gentle hand over the nostrils of his Palamino. Ted performed a like office for his dun gelding. Both men did their utmost to ensure that neither mount was guilty of a betraying whinny, stamp or snort.

They stood in a leafy hollow, concealed by mesquite-cast shadows from any casual glance. By contrast, the terrain beyond the hollow was almost bright as day. Riding past, Sneed Bellamy was clearly visible in the moon's brilliant light.

The bearded renegade was tired. Less alert than was usual, he slumped in his saddle, with the chin that was whisker-covered drooping towards his chest.

Neither was he aware of any need for caution. Not far ahead were the illuminated buildings of the Running Maverick.

Leander spoke when Bellamy was out of ear-shot. "The betting is that hellion is some kind of owl-hoot."

"And how," Ted assented. "He has villain written all over his ugly map."

Below them, Bellamy climbed stiffly to the ground. Several Running Maverick punchers

came to meet him. One of them led his horse away to the stable-block. The door of the ranch house opened, to reveal Lance Harder in dark silhouette.

Then he was gone, and Bellamy with him. The door of the ranch house shut behind them. They flitted across the living-room window, dropped into chairs, and so out of sight.

"Forty-eight hours of spying," Leander said illy. "Harder is surely cagey. I haven't had a proper glimpse of him yet."

"He could be ill," Ted reasoned, "but I don't allow he is. More likely playing some tricky game. Whatever the mystery, Leander, I'll own it, has me beat."

"Me, too," agreed Leander, and then the pair were silent for a space.

Ted wondered what Seth and Iris Peabody made of his absence. He hoped they were not too worried about him. He must attempt to contact them soon. He imagined that he would find them at the Lazy S.

Since his rescue from lynching by Leander, he had in effect been content to drift. One day the range detective would doubtless explain his interest in Lance Harder. Trusting the other, Ted was satisfied to be patient and wait.

Ted emerged from his reverie. "You know, Leander, that hairy son could after all be the snake who slapped a dirty bullet into the Mex holding the flag of truce."

"Could be." Leander nodded. "If he swung a wide loop after doing it, that would account for us not finding any hint of his tracks."

"Fits in," Ted said musingly, "but raises certain other questions. The bimbo with the beard is no Running Maverick hand. Waal, where has he been since the shooting? Holed-up with a g some hide-out or other? If so, why is Lance der con-sort-ing with a bunch of owl-hoots?"

"Would be natural to Harder," Leander returned, "if Harder is the jasper I'm hoping he is."

Through association with Leander, Ted was no longer mantled in deepest gloom. He managed to grin.

"I'm itching to know what you could have on Harder, but I'm too doggone polite to ask you what it is."

Leander chuckled drily. "And I'm too doggone cautious to tell you—till I'm sure of my facts. Howsomdever, on a case I once fell down badly. Never did cotton to failure. I leave you to chew on that."

Ted began to whistle softly. He was sure that the men who moved in and among the Running Maverick buildings could not hear him. The said guards were seemingly a permanent fixture. They were on duty day and night. Moreover, Lance Harder persisted in hugging the ranch house, for reasons best known to himself.

"Say, Leander," Ted demanded, "how would it be to trail Mister Whiskers if he comes out and moseys away from this place?"

Leander laid a hand on Ted's shoulder. "A first-chop notion, and we'll do just that," he said.

In the living-room of the Running Maverick ranch house, Bellamy sucked at a cigar and drankisky neat. He yawned hugely at intervals. The eyes he fixed on Harder were red-rimmed from lack of sleep.

Harder grimaced. "Looks like you had a rough time, Sneed. You able to talk now, or would you rather wait till morning, when maybe you will be rid of your attack o' the gapes?"

"I can yawp now," Bellamy responded, showing no sign of taking offence. "Lance, we likely got many notes to exchange and com-pare. Being so, which of us works his jaw-harness first?"

"Be pleased to hear you yammer, Sneed. 'Fore you begin though, you help yourself to another snort."

Bellamy made use of the bottle, drank deep and smacked his lips. He went on to describe the scene in the valley, his ascent of a tree, the killing of the Mexican sheep-herder who had on Seth Peabody's orders carried the flag of truce.

"Sure worked a treat," the renegade continued. "A shindig started *muy pronto*, and them greasers licked the tar out of them fool ranchers. Yeah, they and their hands was surely booked for tall

trouble. Mind you, I never lally-gagged to watch, but soon tumbled to the d'rection the wind was blowing. Them oilers was all mustard. Liable to finish topsides. Me, I been in too much scrapping to make a mistake."

"Give you full marks," Harder interjected. "The Kellys and their rannyhans got sent to the right about."

"Don't surprise me none," Bellamy resumed. "Waal, I lit a shuck away from there like I just done hinted, pirooted around here, there and yonderly, covering my tracks. Rode to join my boys at the ren-dez-vous. They was there with the mule train, which was loaded with rot-gut in barr'ls, carbines and spare shells for the Sioux."

"My boys is now waiting for me waal hid out plumb adjacent to the Low Hollow Reservation. Less'n a day's march from where Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse has a mob of young bucks collected and is fair raring to go."

Bellamy sucked at his teeth, asserted, "That is the lot, Lance. Your turn to do the spieling, and put me wise as to what has been going on round here."

"You done waal," Harder began, "and ain't your fault the range war has fizzled out sorter."

"Peabody calls off his chile-eaters and goes back to the Lazy S to lie low. 'Pears he ain't busting to be caught up in no serious ruckus. No, Sir, not nohow."

"The Kellys was sore at being licked, but 'fore they could get up on their hind-legs again, Joe Watson descends upon them with a large posse. All his deputies was Milton citizens, and though they don't love snoozers, neutral kinder.

"Waal, Watson lays the law down, and the Ranchers' 'Sociation is willing to pipe down time he is through.

"He then goes to the Lazy S to breathe in Seth Peabody's ear. Seth Peabody is all sub-missive, allows he never wanted no fight to kick off with, and, less he's forced to, don't intend to sling lead around no more. Yeah, him and Joe Watson got along together like they was a house on fire.

"Okay, that's how it is. Peabody nice and peaceful. The Kellys and their pards licking their wounds and sulking, but not anxious to cross Joe Watson until somebody or something obliges them to."

Bellamy laughed coarsely. "Is dead easy. Make one side blame the other. Kidnap the Peabody wench, or burn a ranch down? Which you figure it ought to be?"

"You never will run short of savvy," Harder remarked admiringly. "I'll say you'll do to take along. Ain't no denying you are a goldurned valuable pardner."

"But as to you're two notions," Harder went on, "be better to prod the Ranchers' 'Sociation and not Seth Peabody. Wouldn't do to have your

boys mauled in a scrap-up with Peabody's oilers. No, be easier to clean out the Rocking Y or some such small outfit one night. The boys doing it could darken their maps with walnut stain, could add considerable to the deception by wearing sugar-loaf hats and sim'lar Mex finery."

"I will see to that," Bellamy promised. "Yeah, you can surely leave that job to me."

"Good, and the rest will work out," Harder said. "The Kellys and their mob will go for Peabody, and, maybe, Joe Watson, too. Yeah, our badge-toter will be riled if he suspicions that Peabody's low greasers set a torch to the Rocking Y."

"Which he will—when I seen to the frame-up," Bellamy boasted. "And. . . talking of the Kellys, is Ted Kelly still with Seth Peabody?"

"No, he has vanished," Harder rejoined. "Peabody mentions it to Watson. Watson tells him not to worry. Says he allows Ted Kelly has moseyed out of Sudden Range, on account of being sick of folk treating him like he was a tarnation stink in their nostrils."

"Could be true," Bellamy suggested. "Not that it signifies. We don't give a dime for ranchers with two-bit spreads—like I argified once before."

Harder smiled. "Only shirt-tail ranch to concern us now is the Rocking Y."

Bellamy grinned. "You said it!" He grinned again. "How is the illness going, Lance? You still reckon to be feeling far from chipper?"

Harder chortled. "I'll tell the world I'm mighty bad. No haff measures 'bout me, Sneed. When I play sick man, you bet your bottom dollar I act the part tolerable waal."

"Ain't no haff measures 'bout me neither." Bellamy yawned. "Will poke the range war into flame again. Will see Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse has the guns and liquor moment the time is ripe for them to start lifting human hair."

CHAPTER X

SETH PEABODY glanced across the table at his frowning daughter. "Iris, are you still wondering what has become of Ted Kelly?" he said.

"Yes, father," the girl conceded. "Somehow I can't believe Sheriff Watson was right in what he thought."

Peabody became troubled in his turn. His wife had died when Iris was little more than an infant in arms. Iris was all his world. He had done his best as a parent. There were uneasy moments, however, when it occurred to him that his masculine affection was a poor substitute for a mother's love.

Iris asked a question. "Father, why should Ted Kelly leave us suddenly without a good-bye? He, oh . . . I'm certain Ted Kelly wasn't that sort of man."

Peabody's expression cleared. Women might be something of a problem, but he had had a wide experience of his own sex in the course of an adventurous life.

"Kelly *wasn't* that sort by nature," Peabody was swift to admit. "Guess I'm referring to the

real Kelly, not to the Kelly who has just walked out on us."

Iris sighed. "I don't quite understand," she returned in a low voice.

"I will explain then, honey lamb." Peabody rolled an unlighted cigar from one corner to the other of his strong mouth.

"I guess Kelly was some happy-go-lucky," Peabody went on. "The kind that is popular with most folk. Reckless, and free and easy, they take being liked for granted. It is liable to hurt them more than somewhat when people start to treat them as though they never washed."

Iris rested her chin on cupped hands. Her green eyes were wide and enquiring. "Go on, please, father," she said.

"Intend to, my dear, and I hope to set your mind at rest. Ted Kelly was impulsive, so he came to see me before I hit Sudden Range, with the aim of preventing a fight.

"Through that, he was obliged to kill Teesdale, which upset him considerable. Turned his brother-ranchers against him, too, mostly because of a skunk named Lance Harder, according to Sheriff Watson.

"This Harder is a mystery man, so far as I can make out. Hot about the collar because of me, but missing when the valley fight took place. Supposed to be ill, but Sheriff Watson allowed he had his doubts of that.

"To get back to young Kelly, I saw something happen to him just after the scrap.

"Didn't tell you before, but I will now. Kelly went over to a wounded cowhand. The cowhand said things that I guess were insulting, twisted his head and spat."

"Oh." Iris felt the smart of tears. "And his crew had deserted him already. How bitter it all must have made him. Father, I begin to understand, but how dreadfully sad."

Peabody struck a match and lit his cigar. He was glad to hide his countenance momentarily behind a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"At first," he resumed, "I wondered if harm could have come to Kelly, but after hearing Sheriff Watson, I changed my views about it. Kelly is of the breed to cut his losses. I would say he has left Sudden Range and everything. I would lay any odds for a while he will roam around like some saddle-tramp."

Iris looked round the living-room which owed so much to her own capable hands. She had great faith in her father's judgment. He must be right, and Ted Kelly of the breed to ride away from trouble. The theory was feasible, but lacking altogether in comfort.

Peabody sensed what might be disturbing his daughter. "When things are quiet," he suggested, "it is on the cards Ted Kelly will come back."

"Is wise for him to quit Sudden Range for a spell," Peabody decided to add. "The Ranchers' Association will forget their grouch against him soon, unless I miss my bet."

"I hope so, father." Iris essayed a smile, but it was a smile without success.

Peabody smoked in silence. He sincerely believed Ted Kelly to be clear of danger, to be riding away from Sudden Range to gratify a personal whim. He eyed his frowning daughter speculatively. If Ted Kelly meant something to her, then. . . . He was candid enough to admit to himself that he would vastly prefer his daughter not to have fallen in love.

Iris was haunted by frightening visions. Her instincts would have none of reason. Ted Kelly had made enemies. In her mind was a terrifying picture of Ted Kelly dead.

Both she and her father were wrong, inasmuch as Ted Kelly was neither departing from Sudden Range nor dead. As a fact, he was on a cat-walk trail, leaning forward and peering down at the jagged rocks bestrewing the floor of the canyon beneath.

The canyon was lighted by the moon and some half-a-dozen fires. Ted studied the scene below him with speculative interest.

There were mules in a pole corral. A similar enclosure surrounded thirty odd mustangs. Ted strained his eyes to distinguish what occupied a

V-shaped niche in the canyon wall directly opposite.

Impossible to be certain, but Ted obtained a strong impression of some kind of mound or other obscured by pegged-down tarpaulin sheets.

"What would they hide with tarps?" he wondered. "Maybe goods for the mules to carry. Could be Harder is in cahoots with a band of smugglers."

Ted was quite taken with his theory. He came to the conclusion that he had the key to the mystery of Lance Harder at last.

It was time to rejoin Dale Leander. Ted began his return journey, negotiating the cat-walk trail with the utmost care, and keeping as close as he could to the cliff.

There was little danger of his being seen from below. He rounded a bend. The worst was over. The camp in the canyon was now out of sight.

A spell of perilous climbing—where the cat-walk trail narrowed—brought him to a ledge which housed Dale Leander, the Palamino and the dun gelding. Leander was statuesque as an Indian. "Waal, Ted?" he asked.

Ted described what the canyon contained. "The thing gave me a notion, Dale," he went on. "A range war could be useful cover. You savvy? Would prevent interested parties from learning that Harder is in a sweet racket with a bunch of contra-band-ists."

Leander meditated. Recording no verdict, "Is the *hombre* we trailed from the Running Maverick down there with the others?" he asked.

"Far as I could tell," Ted informed him. "Was someone resembling that bimbo, but I couldn't rightly swear whether it was our Mister Whiskers or not."

"Likely it was," Leander argued. "We know he entered the canyon at this end. Chances are he wouldn't ride straight through. He'd travelled far, and the betting is he had a rendezvous with the rest of that mob."

"Where do we go from here?" Ted queried. "Would say the crowd in the canyon has settled down for the night."

"And we settle, too," Leander replied. "Let us look for a place to camp."

The ledge ran back, and just beyond it was a miniature plateau, access to which was possible through an unexpected gap. It was blessed with a spring. There was moderate grazing. Ground-hitched, the dun and the gelding cropped at the sparse grass.

To light a fire would be unwise. Ted and Leander ate hard biscuits and cold jerky, helped themselves to water from the gurgling spring.

Sprawled side-by-side and draped in blankets, they built themselves cigarettes. Then, in the manner of men who have grown to understand each other, they smoked in contemplative silence.

Friendship had already ripened between them. Leander was glad of Ted's company. Ted was grateful for Leander's companionship.

Leander said suddenly, "Ted, I am coming clean with you. Does the name Luke Hornby ring a bell in your thoughts?"

Ted riposted without hesitation, "No, Dale, nary a bell."

"Waal, nigh fifteen years back Hornby was a terror in the part of Texas where I was. Robbed banks and stage coaches, held up a train or two, salivated quite a few deputy-sheriffs and a lot of unfortunate possemen. No one could ever put salt on his tail, nor on the tails of his fast-riding gang."

Leander paused. Ted drew lazily at his cigarette. "Do tell me more," he said.

"Okay. I was a range detective, but a young man then. Hadn't much of a reputation, wherefore I was mighty pleased when Wells-Fargo called me in. Luke Hornby was road-agenting their coaches more than they cared for. They offered me twenty thousand bucks to go out and bring him in.

"I did my best, but my best didn't make the raffle. Luke Hornby just laffed at me. Played me for a sucker. Folk allowed I was a poor detective. Then Wells-Fargo sacked me. Seemed as though I was ruined. For a year I came near starving. That is a period I never will forgive."

Ted interjected with genuine sympathy, "Gee, but that is something I can surely understand."

"I had to leave Maxon," Leander went on. "Hurt me, and I wasn't keen to ride the chuck-line like any saddle-bum. Had to, though, until I was able to clean up the Ritson gang by happen-so, which gave me a lucky break."

"Yeah, as a range detective that put me back on the map. From then on, I never had another failure. Earned a heap of dinero, too. It went in the bank, so now I have the right to call myself an independent cuss."

Leander concluded, "That is most of the story. Wouldn't amaze me if you had sufficient savvy to work out the rest."

Ted cogitated, beginning with the reflection that Leander was one of those queer mortals who looked young when old and commensurately old when young. And he was evidently a man of iron determination, one of the kind who would neither forget nor forgive a grievance.

"Could be I got it," Ted ventured. "Maybe Luke Hornby rattled his hocks out of Texas, and ain't ever been heard of since. Wouldn't be the first hoot-owl to rob a district, then set up respectable on the proceeds some place else."

"Granting I'm on the target so far, I'm betting you figure you and Hornby still have to settle accounts. Yeah, could be at last you reckon you have a line on him. Luke Hornby. Lance Harder."

Same initials. You suspicion them two could be the same person? Don't be afraid to bump me down if my notions amount to no dice."

Leander laughed. "Ted, you surely have all the brains you want. That is exactly the way it goes. After twenty years I come across the name Lance Harder. A man I met in Yucca described him to me. I e-lected to take a look-see at Lance Harder. Hoped I might find the hellion I glimpsed in Maxon a long time back—for a matter of seconds—when the gun-smoke was thick."

"Playing a hunch sort of," Ted suggested. "Must be plenty hunch-playing in a cow-detective's job."

"There is, and that is what I am doing," Leander acquiesced.

Ted whistled a snatch from a plaintive melody, drummed on a chap-shielded thigh with fingertips. "Dunno if you will be able to prove Lance Harder is Luke Hornby, but I do savvy this. Lance Harder is mean and ornery, full of mangy tricks. Be a pleasure to have you unmask him either road. Be a pleasure for me to help."

"That is mighty handsome of you—and I mean it," Leander remarked.

"That is just nuts," Ted chided. "I don't love Lance Harder. 'Sides, I owe you a lot. I had deg-en-er-at-ed into no great shakes when you found me, Dale. Now, waal, could be I am less of a miserable squirt than I was."

CHAPTER XI

THE sun had been up for several hours when Sneed Bellamy woke. The camp was astir around him. Washing was a luxury which failed to attract him. He began his day, however, with a hearty breakfast.

He lounged against a rock when the meal was over. There came to him Dirk Ralton, his evil-faced lieutenant.

"Squat," Bellamy invited. "I got plenty news for you, Dirk."

Ralton arranged himself cross-legged on the ground. He released his nearest approach to a smile. "Am all ears, Sneed," he said.

Bellamy told his story, continued, "So y'see, Dirk, time is still the doggone essence of the contract. Would never do to have Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse on the rampage too soon. First we got to bust open the Rocking Y, so that Peabody and the ranchers will get wringy 'th one a-nother again."

Ralton tugged at a twisted ear, scraped the back of a dirty hand across a pock-marked cheek. "Can do," he commented, "'cept maybe for one thing. Disguise the boys as chile-eaters—huh!

Where in thunder do we get hold of the Mex togs we'd want?"

"We don't. Is a de-tail. Never troubled to argue with Lance Harder 'bout it though." Bellamy used a match to explore among the discoloured fangs he miscalled teeth.

"How do we make it look like Peabody done it then?" Ralton was quick to ask.

"That is sure easy as falling off a log. Will show you in a jiffy. All I re-quire is some bits of wood or hide and a pointed iron spike."

"Can provide same," Ralton promised. "Waal, do I hit the grit for the Rocking Y, or do you crave the job?"

"Is yours," Bellamy riposted. "I will rest here. You can go on the prod tonight."

Ralton nodded indifferently. He was bored with inactivity. Murder and arson were minor sins in his sight.

Neither he nor Bellamy saw Leander peer down at them from the cat-walk trail above. Leander was flat on his stomach. He and Ted had taken it in turns to survey the outlaw camp at intervals through the night.

Leander was able to recognise in the bearded Bellamy the quarry he and Ted had trailed from the Running Maverick.

He saw that the tarpaulins mentioned by Ted were till in position. He had no means of ascertaining, however, exactly what the tarpaulins hid.

Still watched by Leander, Bellamy and Ralton moved over to one of the fires. On orders from Ralton, an owl-hoot brought them a number of strips of hide and a rusted iron picket-pin.

Ralton smirked, as the man departed. "Lucky we had to rustle a cow-crittur to eat two days back and kept them bits of skin."

"Sure was." Bellamy inserted the picket-pin among the flames, left it thus to heat.

He examined the hide, said drawlingly, "Branded Crossed Arrow. So you been pinching some of Hank Kelly's prime beef."

"You bet. Was nice flavoured, too." The pock-marked Ralton grinned.

Bellamy drew his improvised poker from the fire when its tip was red-hot. There followed the smell of scorching, as he set to to produce crude lettering on the underside of one of the hide strips.

His first effort read, "You now got the war you wanted. Seth Peabody."

Ralton praised his leader's handiwork. Tongue in bearded cheek, Bellamy thought hard. Inspiration proved elusive, but, by dint of inventing variations of his original theme, he was able to design and finish five similar placards.

When the last was completed, he entrusted the six to Ralton, drawled, "You leave them around after the shooting and burning, and I figure they will do."

"You bet they will," Ralton said. "You ail some a clever guy."

Above, still prostrate on the cat-walk trail, Leander watched what went on below with a puzzled eye. Too distant to distinguish clearly what had just taken place, his attention was diverted from it by the subsequent actions of Ralton and Bellamy. He saw the two ruffians go over to the tarp-concealed mound, lift a corner of the covering and roll out what he assumed correctly to be a keg of whisky.

His suspicions were confirmed when the keg was broached. Ralton and Bellamy filled and emptied twin tin mugs. The rest of the outlaws gathered round for a morning drink, summoned to do so by their leaders.

Leander effected a cautious retreat to where Ted was taking his ease on the miniature plateau.

Having listened to his friend's report, Ted commented, "Got no ideas 'bout what sounds like some sort of branding act, but the liquor gives me notions. Dale, do you know something? The Low Hollow Reservation is only kitty-corner from here."

"Stocked with Sioux," Ted added. "Plumb mean if they get their hands on rot-gut rum or whisky."

Leander nodded. Ted continued, "Mister Whiskers and Lance Harder are seemingly in cahoots. Lovely dove, if I'm right, we have them by the

Sort hairs. Yea, I don't need to tell you smuggling hooch to the feather-dusters is bang against Federal Law."

"You don't," Leander assented. "And that surely gives us a plan of campaign. We stick closer than glue to a blanket to this renegade convoy."

"As you say," Ted acquiesced. "Okay. That is what we do."

There followed an afternoon of spying from the cat-walk trail at the outlaw camp below. A monotonous vigil until early evening, when Ralton and eight other members of the band threw saddles on their mustangs and prepared to head for the Rocking Y.

Ted slithered back to where Leander dozed in the westering sun. Leander woke on the instant, listened thoughtfully to what Ted had to say.

The range detective made the most natural mistake in the world. "Going to make contact with the Sioux some place," he suggested. "The rest of the outfit will ride to the rendezvous when they know the coast is clear."

"No call for us to change our plans then," Ted reasoned. "No, we trail the mules and such when they hit the grit. No cause to bring in the John-laws till we got definite proof. The Sioux may fight among themselves, but nothing worse. By grab, but there ain't been a Injun rising for years and years. Ain't likely to be one now."

Ted returned to his post on the cat-walk trail, when Leander had agreed that it was first essential to keep track of the main outlaw band, and that there was no immediate hurry—without more definite proof—to ride in search of the law.

Ted was in time to see Ralton bend forward in his saddle and lay a reassuring hand on Bellamy's shoulder. "You don't have to fret," Ralton said. "The ranchers will be on the prod plenty soon. Goshamighty, the fire me and the boys start by lighting ricks, barns and buildings will surely be visible a doggone long way away."

CHAPTER XII

WHAT remained of the Rocking Y still burned brightly, but the haggard men who fought the flames realised bitterly that there was no hope of saving anything from the devouring fire. Nor any worth-while reason for salvage. Brink Taylor had done with ranching. His charred body reposed under a blanket. With him had perished his ten-year-old son, his wife and the three elderly hands of the Rocking Y.

Bare-headed, his expression bleak with mingled rage and grief, Mace Kelly read from a strip of hide, "You got what you asked for. Seth Peabody." His voice shook. Those who heard him understood. It was common knowledge that he had loved Myra Davies before she had decided to marry Brink Taylor.

Other members of the group had other placards, placards which were united in telling a damning lie. News of the fire had spread quickly. Those of the Sudden Range ranching community not already present had been sent for, were pounding with their respective hands towards the Rocking Y.

Mace Kelly let the placard fall, thumped his

right fist into his open left palm, ran fingers that trembled through his disordered hair. "Conblast them," he said. "May they rot. Specially Seth Peabody."

Hank Kelly said, "This time we hit the Lazy S with all we got. To hell with Joe Watson, if he wants to interfere."

"Don't allow he will," Ralph Kelly ventured. "He could take action on this hisself. Can't though, not till he gets back from the County Seat, where he has gone for a day or three."

"Blister Joe Watson," Mace Kelly said sourly. "By the time he hits Milton again, this business will be through."

So the dormant range war began to flame anew. Prejudice seized on biased minds, allied itself with feelings of racial antipathy. There was vicious hatred in hearts harbouring the mistaken impression that Mexicans had murdered wantonly a young American boy.

The Kelly brothers were the backbone of the fresh threat to the life and possessions of Seth Peabody. Outlying outfit after outfit arrived to be enrolled. By mid-morning of the following day, Mace Kelly was again in command of a formidable army.

There was no open opposition to his leadership, though there were some who remembered uneasily his initial failure.

But their attention was soon turned to

something else. A Treble 3 cowboy appeared on a lathered mount. Smothered in trail dust, the rider reported to Mace Kelly.

The Treble 3 rancher addressed his force. "Jenkins here has just come from the Running Maverick, where Lance Harder is still mighty sick, or malingering on us, whichever it may be. Yeah, and is the same as formerly concerning his crew. The hellions won't back our play till Lance Harder is fit to fork leather."

There were growls of anger. A voice remarked, "We best go and doctor Harder, once we done for Peabody."

Mace Kelly's hard features contorted. "Any man worth his salt would come with us, though he was dying. Have a word with Lance Harder, Bowen. I allow you got something there."

Minutes later, the ground shook to the thud of many hooves. Leather creaked. Harness jingled. Butts of carbines gripped in capable hands slapped incessantly against chap-shielded thighs.

Mace Kelly threw out a strong screen of scouts. Believing Seth Peabody to be responsible for the attack on the Rocking Y, he naturally imagined the sheepman to be prepared for war. Mace Kelly observed to Ralph, who rode on his left, "Peabody will surely be looking for a visit from us. This time he don't catch us 'thout our pants in no flaming valley."

"You bet he don't," Ralph Kelly said. "Would

pay to swing a widish loop and take the bustard kinder sudden in the rear."

"What I aim to do," Mace Kelly said. "Will give orders for a change of d'rection right presently."

Without incident the long ride continued, a ride drawn out because Mace Kelly and his warriors effected a sweeping detour. As the light faded, they halted in the shelter of a grass-covered bench, with their goal not far away.

Mace Kelly was puzzled and worried. He suspected a trap, because he had encountered no trace of opposition so far.

Accordingly, he became over-cautious. There must be no hitch on this second occasion. He could not forget that his first expedition had ended in a fiasco.

The delay cost him the opportunity of surprising Seth Peabody.

Gringo Nelson, one of Peabody's American herders, reported to his employer. He described the extent of the Ranchers' Association party and its existing location, wound up with a drawled, "After I spotted them, hung on their skirts till I could slip past. They never see me, which is fortunate, and they is surely loaded for bear."

Peabody took prompt action. Whatever the reason for this apparently hostile visitation—and he could think of no adequate reason—he was determined not to be caught unawares. The Lazy

S buildings were soon ready to withstand a siege. Riders were sent to collect the herders who were at a distance from the ranch with the vast Peabody flocks in their care.

In the ranch house, Iris talked with her father. The girl possessed a high order of courage, but, as was characteristic of her sex, hated the prospect of war.

She said, "Are you going to try and find out what they want before it is too late, father?"

Peabody shook his head. "No, my dear, they are not to be trusted. If they want a fight, they can have one. Swine who don't respect a flag of truce are liable to get short shrift from me."

Iris sighed. Some five minutes later, the Kelly faction charged out of the night at the Lazy S. It was still dark, though the moon was on the point of rising. Battle was joined, the darkness split by the orange flashes of rifles and revolvers.

The Kellys and their fighting-men stormed in and among the Lazy S buildings. Windows were shattered, walls bullet-pocked. In reply, the defenders emptied half-a-dozen saddles.

The ranchers and cowboys pressed home their assault. Some dismounted, endeavoured with matches and kerosene, to set the bunkhouse on fire.

The occupants of the bunkhouse poured out with revolvers blazing, extinguished the flames,

killed three of the would-be fire-raisers, compelled the others to retire.

Attempts to ignite the ranch house and the cook shack were also thwarted. More and more of the defenders abandoned cover. Men fought hand-to-hand in the darkness, using knives, rifle-butts, the long, hard barrels of heavy Colts. Here and there a booted foot thudded into yielding flesh. Here and there a knuckly fist connected with an opposing jaw.

The moon rose to illuminate the struggle. Little advantage lay with either side. Then the sheep-herders who had been guarding the flocks arrived on snorting mustangs. Their intervention turned the scale. Driven back, the cowboy-rancher force broke off the engagement, sullenly withdrew.

But not far. Reforming, they circled the Lazy S buildings in Commanche-fashion, firing from their saddles at the enemy. The sheep-herders returned the fire with spirit. Those of them who were mounted charged out at the foe surrounding them, found a weak spot in the ring and shot their way through.

Cast momentarily into confusion, cowboys and ranchers manœuvred wildly, suffered some dozen casualties. Peabody saw his opportunity, seized it. Leaving only a skeleton garrison in the ranch buildings, he emerged from the stable-block. Astride a grulla gelding, he led thirty of his

Mexicans in a flank movement against the Kelly party.

Once again the Ranchers' Association force was driven back, fighting desperately. Hank Kelly was hit in the shoulder. Ralph Kelly lost the tip of an ear.

But there was no rout on this occasion. The ranchers and their hands rallied, formed a mounted square. The sheep-herders broke against it, were in their turn obliged to retire.

Throughout the night the struggle persisted, first one side and then the other gaining the upper hand temporarily. Dawn saw both factions exhausted, the ground littered with dead and wounded. The sight was a distressing one, produced similar reactions in Mace Kelly and Seth Peabody.

Both felt sickened by the carnage. Simultaneously their wearied supporters lost heart. The firing sank to a spasmodic mutter of shots, as the sun began to warm the blood-soaked earth, died away altogether.

Mace Kelly capitulated to sudden impulse in the uneasy silence which ensued. Alone, he rode forward, with palm outward on a right arm that was lifted above his head. A brief pause, and then Seth Peabody cantered to meet the man he had cause to count his mortal foe.

Midway between their respective forces they reined in their mounts. Mace Kelly said, "I

reckon we best have a armistice for the sake of them that is hurt Peabody."

Peabody shrugged. "We have got to the point of stale-mate. You any particular terms in your mind, Kelly?"

"Yeah, say a four-hour break. Keep the bulk of our rannyhans 'bout a mile a-part. Them that is to tend the wounded will shuck their shooting-irons 'fore they have a go."

"Suits me," Peabody assented. He looked round him. Like those subdued by the lees of wine, the men of both factions were apathetic. There was no fight left in them. The fierce tension of battle was gone from the air.

Hooves thudded to a standstill on Peabody's left. It was Iris, riding a coal-black jennet. Mechanically, Mace Kelly touched fingers to the brim of his sombrero.

The girl was pale. She said, "My father has been the good neighbour he promised. You come here wantonly, and innocent men are killed. You and your brothers-ranchers ought to be heartily ashamed, Mr. Kelly."

Mace Kelly turned a dull brick red. "Heck, ma'am, but you got a nerve. You expect us to sit quiet after what you father's hellions done to the Rocking Y?"

Peabody frowned. "I don't understand. What utter nonsense is this?" Iris demanded scornfully.

Mace Kelly explained. Tugging one of the hide

placards from his saddle-bag, he handed it to Iris, growled, "Waal ma'am, there you are."

Father and daughter examined the strip of hide. Peabody said nothing. "My father is an educated man. He's not responsible for this crude rubbish!" Iris exclaimed indignantly.

Vague doubt woke in Mace Kelly's mind. The girl was fine to look at. Her expression said honest, too. Unless Peabody had acted without her knowledge, then. . . . Mace Kelly's doubts crystallised. He was conscious of sudden fear.

"Our men aren't callous murderers of women and children," Iris remarked with biting contempt. "They don't even fire at a flag of truce, which is more than some people can say."

Mace Kelly's dismay was almost comical. "Bet it was none of us," he protested. "I swear it. Heck, wonder who did do it. Figure that is a question we should have gone into before."

Peabody spoke. "Kelly, time you and I had a long chat. Could be we are being made suckers of by some interested third party."

"For the love of Pete," Mace Kelly gasped. He goggled hopelessly.

CHAPTER XIII

At the southern extremity of the Low Hollow Reservation was an all but circular basin, entrance to which was difficult to anyone unacquainted with the winding trail through the surrounding cholla, Spanish bayonet and tanglebriar.

The trail held no secrets for Ralton and Bellamy. Equally at home concerning its many twists and spirals were Yellow Horse and Crazy Bear.

Crazy Bear was tall and willowy, lithe, with high cheek-bones, eagle-beaked, fierce-eyed and cruel-mouthed—a typical Red Indian warrior.

By contrast, Yellow Horse was squat, flat-faced and blunt-nosed. Moreover, despite a sagging stomach, he was amazingly agile.

The two chiefs had with them five hundred young bucks. The young bucks were finding it hard to preserve the stoic demeanour of their race. The lust to shed blood was in their veins. They were anxious to prove that they were no less hardy and courageous than their forefathers.

Watching the braves in the light of many fires, Bellamy was impressed by what he saw. Liquor-maddened, they would be the devil to handle. The

renegade was almost frightened for a moment or two.

The sensation passed. He said, "Waal, here is all the stuff I promised, Crazy Bear."

Having counted the mules with their kegs and tarpaulin-wrapped bundles, Crazy Bear signified approval with perhaps the loudest grunt of his career.

Yellow Horse was at least as delighted. Bellamy surveyed the two chiefs with calculating interest. Neither was young, but both were in their prime. No wonder the young warriors of the tribe were so ready to follow them into battle.

Each man at the head of his mustang, Ralton and the rest of the outlaw band were lined up beyond the mule-train. The harsh-featured ruffians were uneasy, had the urge to say good-bye to the Sioux before the raw liquor began to flow.

Bellamy shared the views of his men. Drunken Red Indians were no respecters of persons. A paleface was a paleface. Alcohol soon drowned any sense of gratitude. Under those conditions, the Sioux would regard one white scalp as being as good as any other.

Bellamy's hair felt quite comfortable undisturbed. Even at the risk of outraging Indian etiquette, he determined to shorten the interview.

He might have spared himself worry given the power to read the minds of Yellow Horse and

Crazy Bear. Long-suppressed, they were in no mood for the conventions, as anxious to be rid of their guest as he was to go.

Bellamy's apologies, delivered haltingly, were waved aside by the pair. Crazy Bear clapped his hands. The young bucks descended on the mules, began with alacrity to unload the precious cargo.

The tops of kegs offered no obstacle to keen-bladed tomahawks. The same sharp weapons were used to sever whang-leather thongs. Bundles dropped from mules, to be opened. Rifles, carbines and boxes of ammunition were fondled lovingly by fingers of coppery hue.

Bellamy presently led his owl-hoot companions out along the circuitous trail and away from the indigenous cholla and chaparral. Clear of it, he pulled out a dirty red bandanna to mop a perspiring brow.

"Glad to be on the move, Dirk," he said. "Them red varmints give me a attack of the mullygrubs."

"Me too," Ralton asserted. "Judas Priest, but the way two-three looked at us—like they was itching to separate us from our hair."

"Which they will do to a lot of folk right soon," Bellamy countered callously.

A brief silence, then Ralton observed, "Was surprised you asked no payment from Yellow Horse or Crazy Bear."

Bellamy spat. "As to that," he returned, "Lance Harder has footed the bill for all the stuff we brung. Was tempted to try get more from them Sioux, but. . . . Waal, I figure I ran short on guts. Was only too plumb anxious to put distance between the murdering critturs and me."

"Me too," Ralton repeated. "I ain't inclined to kick. No, you got my backing there."

The moon revealed the outlaw band, a long line of riders, except for their leaders, who travelled in the van as a pair.

The file of horsemen was under observation, watched by Ted and Leander. Side-by-side, the two were on rising ground, concealed among the shadows at the base of a clump of tall cedars.

"If that's them," Ted said slowly, "where is the mule-train now?"

"Handed over to someane else," Leander riposted.

Ted nodded. "Missed that because we lost the sign a while back. For crying out loud, what's to do? Is a nuisance."

Leander considered. To solve the current problem was unlikely to prove a simple task.

Recalling how it had arisen, the range detective decided that no blame attached to Ted or himself.

The return of the nine who had ridden to destroy the Rocking Y had been the signal for jubilation in the outlaw camp. Denied knowledge

of the errand undertaken by the nine, as concerned the cause of the rejoicing, Ted and Leander had been completely in the dark.

Next, driving the mule-train before them, the outlaws had left the canyon at the far end. Handicapped by the necessity of descending to low level by narrow and perilous trails, Leander and Ted had fallen far behind, had lost track of their quarry altogether at a point where the latter had taken a short cut across an old lava bed.

Now, here they were, but in a quandary, unsure of whether to go after the outlaws, or whether to search for the Indians who had presumably received the supposed whisky kegs.

Neither course had much appeal. Without direct evidence to show that Harder was involved in smuggling raw alcohol to the Sioux, the chances of convicting the Running Maverick owner were distressingly remote.

For him and Ted to separate might be the answer. They would never be able to swear to having seen the contraband handed over, but. . . . With luck, circumstantial evidence might take the place of the desired visual proof.

It was then that disaster occurred in the form of a yipping coyote. The animal was near, having with unusual carelessness blundered upon the human and equine group. Its startled yelp was effective in derailing Lander's train of thought.

Moreover, the range detective's Palamino

reared, twisted, lashed out with iron-shod hooves, screamed out in sudden fright.

The coyote fled. Ted's dun gelding stamped and snorted wildly. The two men quieted their respective horses, but by then the mischief was done.

Bellamy and his band were streaking towards the rising ground and the cedar clump.

Leander and Ted hit their saddles together. Riders of the dim trails remained alive only by being alert and reacting swiftly to danger. The ruffians galloping towards them were evidently no exception to the rule. Ted and Leander needed no conference to tell that their one hope of survival lay in rapid and successful flight.

The pair broke from the trees. The ground sloped down away from them. For a moment they were etched on the skyline against the bright moonlight.

Bellamy's blackguards yelled and shouted. Held at the point of balance, threatening rifles were shaken aloft. As the band toiled upwards, small tufts of earth and grass sprayed out from the mustangs' thudding feet.

Ted and Leander were mounted on splendid examples of horseflesh. On the other hand, the mustangs were not to be despised in a long chase. Possessed of unbelievable stamina, the shaggy-coated creatures could exist on a minimum of fodder, were sure-footed as mountain-goats where the going was rough.

Ted and Leander were without illusion. Ahead was barren *malpais*. Strange terrain. As objects of suspicion to wanted men, they would have their work cut out to shake off what would be a grim and determined pursuit.

Ted raised his voice in a lusty, "If them hellions behind lose track of us, won't be their fault."

"You bet it won't—conblast them," Leander shouted back.

In their wake, Bellamy and Ralton conversed together in voices that were loud and harsh.

"Them two could be night-hawks like us," Ralton bellowed. "Can't afford no chances though. Got to find out."

"Yeah, and how," Bellamy roared. "You keep after them yahoos with most of the boys. I will take three-four back with me to tell Lance Harder—the Sioux will be some ornery now most any moment."

CHAPTER XIV

WAR-BONNETS clicking behind them, Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse led their warriors through the night. Faces painted in hideous design, the young bucks swayed on the blankets which served them as saddles. Rifles were brandished, scalping-knives and tomahawks, too.

Neither Crazy Bear nor Yellow Horse had any great liking for Sneed Bellamy, and the unmet Lance Harder had no pattern in their thoughts. The two chiefs were scarcely more sober than the most drunk of their followers. Their one aim was to exact vengeance from the hated white man for bitter past defeat.

The Red tide swept over the Rainbow-Bar, a spread so small as to rank little higher than a squatter's nest. They butchered Tom Harrison, his wife, son and two daughters, paused to torture Sam Fairclough, the solitary ranch hand, to death. They left him among burned-out buildings, a lifeless figure, tied to a wooden stake.

The next point marked for destruction on their list was the Lazy S. Fortune was kind to the Sioux. Since the inconclusive fight between Peabody's herders and the cattlemen of Sudden

Range, as concerned both factions in the range war, vigilance had greatly relaxed. Mace Kelly and Seth Peabody had come to an understanding. The four-hour truce had been extended indefinitely. The Ranchers' Association had ridden away, headed by a Mace Kelly who was satisfied that the agreed armistice would last.

Taken completely by surprise by the Sioux, Peabody's scattered night-herders were slaughtered before they could resist. By then the young bucks were silent, disciplined by the dreaded Crazy Bear and the equally dreaded Yellow Horse. The two chiefs having attained to near sobriety, were doubly dangerous. As recorded, Peabody's unfortunate night-herders were cut to pieces, singly or in small groups.

The last Mexican to die squibbed off his rifle just before a murderous knife pierced his throat. The shot roused the occupants of the Lazy S buildings. They woke sleepily to life.

The warning prevented an immediate massacre, but was too belated to allow the Lazy S to be put in a proper state of defence. Dazed men, clad merely in shirt and trousers, staggered out of the bunkhouse, to find themselves assailed by the Sioux and engaged in a hand-to-hand fight.

Rifles and revolvers flashed and exploded. The Sioux abandoned silence, released traditional war-whoops. The Mexican shepherders responded with

strident Spanish oaths, called on their patron saints.

They were brave, and their skill with knives gave the yelling braves furiously to think. But everything was against them. They were outnumbered, overwhelmed by the ferocity of the enemy and the nightmare quality of the unexpected attack.

Howling Sioux set fire to the bunkhouse. Constructed of dried timber, the building blazed rapidly. Leaping flames added to the horror of the scene being enacted in the moonlight night.

Tomahawks bit into the ranch house door. On the inside, Seth Peabody fired through the woodwork, a Colt in either hand.

Upstairs, Iris struggled into the last of her clothing, buckled a neat gun-belt about her slim waist. In the appropriate holster reposed a Smith & Wesson .38.

The frightened girl ran across to the window. She saw a Sioux scalp a dying American sheepherder. She reeled, near to fainting, a trembling hand at her throat.

Leaning against the neighbouring wall, she fought against the weakness that was akin to panic. The door of her room opened. Her father rushed in shouting, "The house is on fire. We must try and get out somehow. The smoke may help us. Iris, hurry, hurry, for God's sake!"

Iris moved across the floor towards him. He

led her from the room, a strong arm about her waist.

As he escorted his daughter down the stairs, his thoughts were chaotic. Choking smoke ascended to meet the pair. The door of the ranch house was burning, crackled fiercely beyond the smoke.

Outside, the fighting was nearly over, but the night was still hideous with the frantic yelling of the triumphant Sioux. The last American sheep-herder perished on a knife-blade. The few surviving Mexican herders were as viciously done to death.

Father and daughter paused in indecision at the end of the passage leading to the rear of the house. Iris groaned. She said, "I . . . I can't . . . bear to face those evil brutes."

She sagged. Seth Peabody caught her falling body. His jaw muscles showed taut and straining through his unshaven cheeks.

The fire was increasing in fury. Better to perish in the flames than encounter the Sioux. For a moment he was tempted to gratify his daughter's unspoken wish.

His courage revived, however. Beyond the back door was wild confusion, smoke that whirled, Indian braves too taken up with scalp-collecting to think of much else.

Nevertheless, as he unbolted the door and turned the handle, Peabody realised just how forlorn a hope it was. He lifted his unconscious

daughter in his arms, carried her out into the night.

Blood-crazed though they were, the nearest warriors saw him, charged at him with frenzied war-whoops. Crazy Bear was among the foremost. He shouted orders in his guttural voice.

The orders were obeyed, and because of them Peabody was saved from instant death. Iris was torn from his protecting arms. Strong fingers prevented him from drawing his six-guns. The flat of a tomahawk connected with the side of his skull.

Other blows followed in swift succession. Kicked, cuffed and beaten, he collapsed, insensible. His howling captors made use of rawhide thongs to bind him hand and foot.

CHAPTER XV .

THE morning sun shone pitilessly on Seth Peabody's unprotected head. His chin drooped dejectedly. He was one mass of cuts and bruises. The thongs securing his wrists and ankles bit cruelly into his flesh.

Similarly, a helpless prisoner, Iris was lashed to an adjoining stake. The girl's eyes were closed, her complexion waxen. She hung without animation. Peabody was grateful that his daughter was still unconscious, and therefore unable to comprehend the terrible nature of their plight.

The Lazy S buildings had been reduced to smouldering heaps of ash. In places, smoke drifted slowly upwards. The odour of burning wood was in Peabody's nostrils. With it were other smells less pleasant, including the horrific stench which is never far behind violent death.

The victorious Sioux were in a torpid state. To begin with, they were gorged with mutton. Secondly, they had brought with them the whisky kegs left over from their original liquor feast.

Peabody's aching brain marvelled at the ways of the Sioux. Time had not changed their habits. As their forefathers before them had treated

buffalo, the Indians had butchered many more than they needed of his sheep.

But that was a minor matter. Peabody was worried for his daughter. When they were sober, he would be put to the torture. And if Iris were also tortured. Peabody shook like a leaf.

He strained tired eyes towards the distant horizon. No sign of a rescue party. There was scant hope of a rescue party. The Lazy S occupied such an isolated position. It was unlikely that the other Sudden Range inhabitants would learn what had overtaken it—until it was too late.

Would the Sioux torture a woman? Peabody believed that they had not done so in the past, but now? He feared that they would.

Reflection in itself was a torment. Peabody verged on coma. Listless dejection overcame him. He resembled a man in a trance.

Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse approximated to the contentment of satiated wild beasts. Time meant nothing to them. Rest first, then torture their captives. Other victories were certain to follow. At their leisure, they would sweep across what remained untouched of Sudden Range, north, south, east and west.

Some fifteen miles away, Ted and Leander crossed a bed of shale at the foot of a limestone cliff. They then paused to let their horses drink in the waters of a shallow creek.

The hooves of the dun and the Palamino were

blanket-muffled. Ted drawled, "Seems as though them poor mutts pulled a boner. Yeah, I reckon our li'l stratagem surely worked."

Leander smiled. "It wouldn't altogether surprise me if we are out of the wood now, Ted."

Ted grinned. The twinkle was back in his eyes. He had always had a love of adventure. The excitement of life with Leander had transformed him into himself again.

"The way we fooled those dirty sons was enough to make a cat laff," he said.

Leander raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. All the same, the said eyes were squinted as he scanned the country beyond the creek.

Ted lit a cigarette, smoked placidly. He felt somehow certain that danger of capture was past.

Dale Leander was a cool one, a man to ride the river with. Come hell or high water, he was more than a match for rustlers, outlaws and their ilk. Blessed with so agile a brain, it was no wonder he was famous as a range detective.

Take the previous night's episode, for instance. Looking back on it, how ridiculously easy it had proved to shake off pursuit.

You didn't run like a scared jack-rabbit. No, you just waited in the shelter of giant boulders, took advantage of the additional cover of a sarvis bush. The rannyhans who craved your blood went blundering by. When they had gone, you muffled

the hooves of your cayuse, rode cheerfully along the tracks the enemy had just left.

Simple as falling off a form. Morning found your pursuers miles away and cursing. With no sign to guide them, they would know no more than that you had vanished utterly from their ken.

Ted chuckled. Leander questioned, "Whereat roughly shall we finish up if we ford this creek and go straight on?"

"Can answer that one, Dale. Somewheres in the vic-in-ity of the Lazy S."

"Why not give it a whirl?" Leander queried. "Could be the Peabodys are worried about you. If you call on them, it will set their minds at rest."

"It's a notion," Ted conceded, wondered if the shrewd Leander suspected how much he, Ted Kelly, cared for Iris.

"Let's go," Leander invited. The pair set their mounts in motion. The Palamino and the dun plashed through the waters of the creek.

On the other side was sandy soil, in which sparse vegetation struggled gamely for life. Sand particles swirled in the sunlit air. Ted and Leander obscured mouths and nostrils with their respective scarves.

Sand became loam, vegetation more abundant as the miles progressed. Scarves were removed. "You figured out the next move in the game yet, Dale?" Ted asked.

Leander bit the end from a short cigar, struck

a match to light it, shielding the flame adroitly with cupped hands. "Not to any extent," he riposted. "I'd say we are back more or less where we started from."

Ted furrowed his brows. "Could be we should have tried harder to track that con-tra-band."

"No dice," Leander responded. "One thing at a time is my motto. Our first consideration was to stay alive—if we could."

"That shines," Ted asserted. "Yeah, that verdict sure makes sense."

Lapsing into silent musing, the pair allowed their mounts to travel at a leisurely jiggle across luxuriant grass. Leander reflected on the Lance Harder angle. Ted enchanted himself with meditating on just how delightful Iris would look.

Leander decided that it would require long and painstaking effort to establish that Luke Hornby and Lance Harder were one. If that indeed was fact to be established. Leander felt certain of it. Yes, Lance Harder was his man.

To prove it, that was different. Constant observation was wanted. Alternatively, some lucky break or other might eventually turn the trick.

Ted emerged from his pleasant reverie, wrinkled his nose. "Hey, can you smell smoke?" he said.

Leander sniffed, holding his cigar as far away from him as he could. "Yeah, I can, and it isn't this weed of mine either," presently he granted.

Ted was alarmed. "If so be the range war. . . . That stink could be burned-out buildings. By grab, but I hope tall trouble hasn't come to the Lazy S."

Leander began to share the younger man's alarm. He discovered cause for apprehension in the variegated scents now assailing his nostrils.

He flung his cigar away from him with a quick flick of the wrist.

Ahead, the landscape sloped gently upwards. His gaze on the distant crest of the rise, Leander suggested, "It might be an idea for me to push on in front and take a solitary look-see over yonderly, Ted."

"Shucks, Dale, I'm going with you. And will pay us both to be cautious. Yeah, surely won't be wise to breast that ridge too promiscuous."

"As you say." Leander loosened his Winchester repeater in its saddle-scabbard. "Walk near the top. Be safer, even though the broncs are moving on muffled hooves."

Dismounting to lead their horses, both men knew fear as they approached the summit of the slope. Neither was without experience of range war, needed no one to tell them how brutal it could become.

Ted's fears were by far the greater. He was haunted by the thought of the harm that might have been inflicted on Iris by rage-blinded men.

Just below the crest, the dun and the Palamino

were left with trailing reins. Leander and Ted completed their upward climb on foot.

Side-by-side on the ground, they edged forward, until they were able to look downwards at the scene on the farther incline of the slope.

Distance rendered Ted's impressions vague, but Leander had field-glasses in position. He ripped out a bitter oath.

Ted's fingers bit convulsively into the soft turf. "Conblasted Injuns. Dale, for God's sake tell me. . . ." His voice died in his throat.

CHAPTER , XVI

LEANDER passed the field-glasses to Ted without a word. Ted took them, brought them into focus, was handicapped by the red mist of fury that seemed to swirl before his eyes.

The emotion of anger was succeeded by grief. Ted forced himself to view the scene below him dispassionately, having clamped iron control on restive nerves.

He was shocked by what he saw, beyond measure. Scalped corpses macabre in the sunlight. The smoking remains of what had been useful buildings. Drunken Sioux who sought to perform a war-dance. Even more drunk Sioux who wallowed hog-fashion on the ground.

Lastly, Ted fixed the glasses on the twin stakes in the background. He saw Peabody first, then Iris. The girl was dead. He cried out aloud.

Leander pressed his friend's arm in warning. "Ease springs, Ted," he pleaded. "I'd say you're wrong, and the prisoners live. If we're going to rescue them, we'll have to keep almighty cool."

"How can we?" Ted asked wearily. "Two of us against five hundred—maybe. Ride for help? Heck, there ain't time."

Leander held his peace, cogitating. Giving way to a sense of helplessness, Ted muttered savage oaths.

"See it all now," said Leander slowly. "Those thugs must have delivered arms as waal as liquor to the Low Hollow Reservation Indians."

"So what? That is plain, but where does it get us?" the disgruntled Ted enquired.

Leander forgave the younger man his petulance. "No place yet, but we may find a destination, Ted, if so be we use our brains."

"Nothing left in my think-box," Ted complained bitterly. "All I want to do is get my hands round the throats of them blackguardly feather-dusters."

Leander ignored the comment, resumed his deep meditations. He saw a gleam of light, said drawlingly, "What do braves on the war-path value most, do you suppose?"

"Scalps, or I haven't a notion," Ted confessed. "Never had any truck with war-whoops. The last bunch to skip a Reserve done so 'fore my time."

Again in a sense Leander ignored Ted's remarks to concentrate on his own. "Their ponies," he said meaningly. "That ring a bell with you a-tall?"

Ted's depressed lethargy was gone in an instant.

"Lovely dove, but it sure does!" he exclaimed.

Leander pointed to where hundreds of Indian ponies were placidly at graze. Retrieving the

field-glasses, he eyed the mass of animals, reported, "Careless of them. No Sioux guard on that *remuda* of theirs."

Ted knew sudden hope. "My grief-a-goshen, stampede the critturs. That what you got in mind?"

"As near as don't matter to contradict," Leander admitted.

"We will need to split up," the range detective continued. "One to rescue the prisoners. The other to put the fear of the Lord in the ponies."

"I begin to catch on." Ted was excited. "Cut out two ponies from the herd as waal. Drive them round for Seth Peabody and Iris to ride."

"Yeah, there is that," Leander agreed. "Listen, it has all got to be worked out to a nicety—with not even haff a de-tail out of place."

The pair put their heads together. When their plan was completed, they had done their human utmost to ensure that nothing was left to the mercy of chance.

The contours of the surrounding terrain were in their favour. Time was the incalculable factor on the debit side of the account.

Ted had volunteered to free the prisoners. Leander had the equally difficult task of stampeding the Indian ponies. Sentiment was out of order, but just before they separated the two men exchanged a firm handclasp.

Leander assumed charge of his Palamino and

Ted's dun gelding. Astride the former and leading the latter, the range detective cantered off on a roundabout course. The initial part of his undertaking was comparatively simple. There were folds in the ground to afford him cover until he came within striking distance of where the warponies were contentedly at grass.

Ted's journey was an arduous one. He was presently in the weed-choked length of what once had been an irrigation ditch.

His progress was slow. There were moments when he had to cut his way with his Barlow knife. Thorns slashed at his clothing. His hands were lacerated. Blood trickled down his face.

He kept on grimly, however. Gnats and similar insects descended on him in stinging clouds. He was obliged to ignore their attentions, dare do no more than curse softly under his breath.

At intervals, he essayed a peep through the foliage on the left bank of the ditch. Many more of the Sioux were on the move. Ted was afraid that the torture of Seth Peabody and Iris would begin before he could reach them and cut them free from the stakes.

There was additional cause for worry, too. Seth Peabody would be too cramped and stiff to move for a while. A last look through the field-glasses had revealed that Iris was still unconscious.

"I can carry her," Ted reflected, was amazed to learn how pleasant was the thought.

Dan Leander was in position. With the dun and Palamino tethered adjacent, he was statuesque and immobile in a stand of cottonwoods.

Watching the Sioux, he told himself that some little while must yet elapse before they ceased to be somnolent. True, only a few still sprawled on the ground, but the majority who shuffled round were far from sober, capable only of a travesty of a real war-dance.

So much the better. When their ponies stampeded, the Sioux would go after them in a lurching and disorderly mob.

Leander turned his glasses on the bound captives, having first consulted a big silver watch.

Ah! Ted was running to schedule. Over behind the stakes in the ground, Leander detected faint movement in a clump of grama grass.

Then Ted came into sight, covering the last precarious yards, slithering forward on his stomach as a lizard might have done. Leander grunted intense satisfaction. It was time for him to strike.

Presently afterwards he galloped out on the Palamino, the dun at the end of a lead-rope attached to his saddle-horn. He swept down on the grazing ponies, yelling with a ferocity that the Sioux themselves might have envied. The ponies took fright, stampeded. Leander drove them before him, out of sight around a not far distant tree-clad butte.

What Leander had foreseen at once came to

pass. Dismay filled the Sioux. In units, twos, threes and larger groups, they streamed in drunken panic after the ponies which could make all the difference between life and death to their owners in the last resort.

By then Leander himself had vanished. Ted scrambled to his feet, covered the last few yards of his journey at a loping run.

The Barlow knife flashed in the sunlight. Freed, Seth Peabody teetered on cramped legs. Ted caught him, lowered him gently to the ground.

Ted stepped over to Iris, began to saw at her bonds. "Get your limbs to working *pronto*," he said to Peabody. "With luck, 'fore you can whisper Bill Bowie, a friend of mine will be here with cayuses for us to ride!"

CHAPTER XVII

MILTON was wild with excitement. But lately returned from his trip to the County Seat, Sheriff Joe Watson demonstrated that he had the coolest head in the agitated cow-town.

He talked frankly to a troubled deputation in his office in the calaboose. He said, "I've done darn-everything I think fit. Shut your traps the lot of you. Goshamighty, anyone would figure this was an Irish wake, with everybody yammering and nobody listening."

The admonition proved successful. Joe Watson was accorded a respectful silence by his fellow-citizens.

"I came back to bump into plenty grief," Watson resumed. "A battle between Peabody and the Ranchers' Association just over, and with both sides badly mauled.

"Seems as though the Mace Kelly bunch was learning sense at last, but too late to prevent them from acting like they was plain ornery fools. Okay. What happens next? The Sioux jump the Reservation for the first time in years.

"Who give them the arms and such we will find out later. To start with, they rampage to the Lazy

S, end the scrap with Peabody's surviving herders con-verted into gone goslings.

"You-all heard how Peabody and his daughter was rescued by Ted Kelly and Dale Leander, the cow-detective. And you savvy what them two done to the war-whoops—stampeded their dog-gone ponies.

"That was Jake, but Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse—bet it is them two pelicanos—ain't to be despised. 'Fore long they will have the ponies collected and their scalp-hunters ready to raise Ned again.

"Hopping mad, they will surely let loose all hell in Sudden Range.

"This being some a backward neck o' the woods, 'thout the telegraph, I ain't positioned to whistle up the cavalry as easy as kiss your hand. Still, I have headed a coupla reliable fellers for Fort Angel—fast as they can ride.

"Other messengers has gone to bring the ranchers and their families into town. I'll tell you why, just in case you waddys figure I'm running short on brains.

"I could, of course, raise a posse and go chasing after them pesky Injuns. Could have a Custer done on it by leading it into a trap. Could likewise miss the Red varmints altogether, when they would burn the wind for and wipe up this burg.

"That don't suit, would lead to all the wimmen and kids getting killed. No, gents, we stay here,

hang on till help comes, never mind how blamed long the siege."

Watson ended his speech, scanned his audience with hard, appraising eyes. The majority were palpably convinced by his arguments. As palpably, betrayed by their doubting expressions, were two objectors.

Watson dealt with Dan Birkett, the blacksmith, first. "You got contrary notions, Dan?" Watson drawled.

Birkett was thick in the head and broad in the shoulders. "Me," he stated slowly, "can't say I take a shine to waiting tamely to be attacked by no stinking Injuns."

"Nor me, Dan," came the serene rejoinder. "But there is this. My Stetson sits nicely on my head while it is hair-covered. If you'd rather wear your hat on nothing, waal. . . . You take a pasaer out and look for them murdering Red swine."

Birkett muttered, "Judas Priest!" Deserted by inspiration at that point, he opened his mouth, closed it again.

Clem Conningsby kept the Milton General Stores. "You're some overrating the danger," he said. "Holy cow, we can surely eat them Sioux 'thout salt. My word, but ain't you overlooking we got modern rifles?"

"Not to notice," Watson told him. "Would seem the Sioux got modern rifles, too. Wouldn't mind betting that sober they can shoot as

straight as some white *hombres* I could name."

Someone laughed. Conningsby blushed. His inaccuracy with any kind of firearm was a standing joke in Milton and for scores of miles around.

Watson drawled, "Waal, that's that," sure that his point was gained. "You beat it now," he added. "Yeah, go help get ready the defences we will need."

The deputation began to trickle from the calaboose. Having assisted their exit sheep-dog fashion, Joe Watson himself prepared to leave.

Keen eyes everywhere, he strolled about the town. He was satisfied with what he saw. The inhabitants of Milton were toiling like beavers.

Log barricades were in process of construction. Sacks were being filled with earth. As a precaution against ricochetting bullets, the earth was sieved to remove stones and fragments of stones. His inspection over, Joe Watson entered and called for a schooner of beer in the Lucky Girl Saloon. He had barely begun to sip his drink when Leander and Ted shouldered their way through the bat-wing doors.

The three foregathered. Watson bought Red-eye for the new arrivals, instructed the bar-keep to provide him with "Another pail of suds."

Watson acquainted Ted and Leander with the steps he had taken, went on to enquire, "How is it now with Peabody and his gal?"

"We got them rooms at the Milton Hotel," Ted

replied. "The sawbones has seen them. Be okay, he reckons. Iris is suffering some considerable from shock though, whereat nobody has any call to be surprised."

Ted concluded with an unconscious sigh. Leander and Watson heard that sigh. Unnoticed by Ted, they exchanged sympathetic and understanding glances.

Mace Kelly stamped unexpectedly into the Lucky Girl Saloon. Approaching the trio at the bar, he nodded at Watson, gazed enquiringly at Leander, then, having grinned sheepishly at Ted, offered a diffident hand.

Ted took it, squeezed it warmly. He said, "Nice to see you again, you old bustard. Yeah, surely nice to lamp your old map'again."

Thus was the hatchet buried. Smiling broadly, Mace Kelly said, "Sure is nice, you wild man. Be seeing Hank and Ralph quite presently. Yeah, they'll be with us plenty soon."

Ted introduced Leander to his cousin. Mace Kelly then remarked to Joe Watson, "Your messenger give me most of the works 'bout the Sioux. But not the hull office—maybe. You care to explain?"

Watson did so. Mace Kelly nodded. "I'm quite agreeable to fort-up here with my crew with the rest till help comes. Yeah, best to play it that way. No dice to go Injun hunting on no wild-goose rides."

He frowned, rubbed his chin, added pensively, "Wonder if Lance Harder will show up this time. If he don't, me and the other 'Sociation members will be more certain than ever that he is behind all the trouble in this neck o' the woods. Dunno why, but could be the bustard organised this Reservation break by the Sioux as waal."

Joe Watson laid a hand on Mace Kelly's shoulder. "There's no proof to indict Harder on that or any charge. Like Peabody and the burning of the Rocking Y. Mace, you want to quit jumping to conclusions, quit also taking the law into your own hands."

"Waal, I'll be hornswoggled," Mace Kelly said, and was obviously crestfallen.

Watson laughed. "Cheer up, Mace. Harder may be just a selfish guy. Could be he feels safe at the Running Maverick. Could be he has objections to mixing in any tough fighting a-tall."

Mace Kelly uttered a dubious grunt. Ted and Leander exchanged a glance full of meaning.

Chancing to see it, Watson said to himself, "Holding out on me, them two. Later on, I will get it out of them, or I'm not the law in Sudden Range."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Sioux found it a long and wearying task to round up their scattered war-ponies. By then they were foot-sore and sober. Not only that, but forced to remain the latter, having during their last debauch exhausted their whisky supplies.

Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse held a council of war, surrounded by disgruntled braves, squatting on the ground. They dispensed with much of tradition, especially the long-winded eloquence of their forebears.

Rendered more astute by a smattering of white man's education, they soon pieced together what had occurred. Their prisoners had been rescued by whoever had stampeded their ponies.

Whoever had stampeded the ponies and freed the captives would have made a point of warning Sudden Range. Further surprise raids were, therefore, out of the question. They had to choose between a bold stroke or a stealthy return to the Reservation. The second alternative was at once ruled out as unworthy and tame.

An attack on Milton was a natural choice. The two chiefs discussed the prospects in their guttural tones.

World would surely have been sent to Fort Angel by the alarmed inhabitants of Sudden Range. Interfering cavalry would have a long distance to travel. It should be possible to destroy Milton, then melt away unobtrusively as the last winter snows. Back on the Reservation—except for the dead—the band could prove they had never left it. No difficulty there. Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse had no reason to doubt the abilities of their brother-Sioux who had stayed at home—as gifted and unscrupulous liars.

Baffled, 'the cavalry would retire' from the Reservation, forced to believe that only the dead had taken part in the attack on Sudden Range. And the wounded, who could be hidden while necessary, made the 'subject of further brilliant lies. Yes, the despised palefaces would be puzzled, and the most likely probability a fine inflicted on the whole tribe.

Set against the raid, a fine was a minor matter. Their minds made up, Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse soon had their huge war-party on the move.

There was to be no wild and furious assault on this occasion, no headlong charge on a town that had had opportunity to prepare for a siege. Nor any reckless gallop into an ambush on the way to Milton. Scouts swarmed on ahead of the main Sioux body, circling constantly, ever on the alert to discharge the modern rifles they so highly prized.

Crazy Bear dreamed of a happy future. The rifles could be stored in some secret place on the Reservation, when the present affair was forgotten, brought out and used again.

While the Sioux advanced on Milton, Ted and Leander were closeted with Joe Watson in the latter's office in the calaboose.

Joe Watson emphasised his remarks with the stem of his pipe. He was blunt in his choice of words.

"You rannyhans mistook me for a sucker," he said, "when you first told your yarn. I'm not a sucker. And you ain't as clever as you figure to be. Out with it now, all you left out. Do I have to remind you I'm local John-law, or are you coming clean?"

Ted's green eyes twinkled. He was content to leave the matter to Leander. Himself was no longer an outcast, and Iris was safe. Warlike Sioux and the vague suspicions of Joe Watson were of no importance.

Watson and Leander exchanged a long and appraising stare. The Sheriff of Milton and District was a student of human nature. He was satisfied that Leander was an honest and competent man.

Leander viewed Watson at least as favourably. The range detective was also a skilled physiognomist.

He tapped the side of his curved and jutting

nose. "Okay, Watson, I am willing to shoot the works."

Leander went on to acquaint Watson with that part of his story omitted from his first account.

"Waal, there it is," he concluded. "Guess I have no concrete evidence to offer, which is why I was some cagey of putting odd sort of notions into a *politico's* head."

Watson glanced involuntarily down at his polished metal badge. "I'm a law-man," he conceded, "but that ain't to signify I'm a blind fool as waal."

Leander raised enquiring brows. "Cut that deck deeper," he entreated. "Yeah, come again."

Watson leaned back in his chair, stretched out long legs, utilised his silver spurs to support his booted feet. He toyed with the topmost button of his open-necked red shirt.

"What you've just spilled is mighty interesting, Leander," he said. "Makes all clear. How you teamed up with Ted there. What you are doing so far away from your own neck o' the woods."

Leander's slate-coloured eyes became even more narrowed than normal. "Regarding the blind fool business," he said laconically, "still waiting for you to elucidate."

"Coming to that Leander, and this is what I meant."

"Y'see," Watson continued, "what you held back from me was that you suspicion Lance

Harder to be the Luke Hornby who once grabbed your pride by the throat. And then . . .? The yahoo you trailed from the Running Maverick to the canyon where he joined up with a bunch of thugs. The nine who took a mysterious pas aer somewheres—afterwards came back.

"Next, the hull gang moseys off with a mule-train. You lose them and it. Later, spotting you, they chase you from there to breakfas' time, or would have done, if you hadn't of give them the slip.

"Something else. The queer kinder branding you watched in the canyon. Add all them things together, and the total sure looks fierce."

Leander murmured, "Go on, Watson," when the sheriff paused to suck at his bubbling pipe.

"Aim to, Leander. Betting is the gang tied up with Lance Harder smuggled arms to the Sioux. Likewise, the nine could have wiped out the Rocking Y. The branding? Waal, could have been the preparation of the hide notices the killers left lying about."

Ted was moved to take part in the conversation. "Heck, but it all fits together more than somewhat," he said.

"Sure does," Watson assented. "Like I allowed, I ain't too blind to see the im-plic-at-ions at a glance. Nor so hot-headed as to go raring after Lance Harder till I got definite proof he is the villain of the piece."

"Or leisure to make enquiry," Watson went on. "Will do that though when the Sioux are licked to a frazzle. Yeah, will go and yank Lance Harder out of his sick bed."

The three men gave themselves over to meditation. Leander lit a 'cigar. Watson's pipe gurgled louder than ever. Ted built himself a cigarette.

"Your notions and mine ride the same trail," Leander said slowly. "I can see why Harder has kept out of the fighting between Peabody and the cattlemen."

"Me, too, Leander," Watson drawled. "Suited him to be out of the range war for some reason best known to himself. Wanted to weaken both sides, I reckon. Then bring in the Sioux to rub out who was left."

"That way, Harder would wind up king-pin of Sudden Range. Be no difficulty to buy cheap the ranches of the dead."

Leander nodded. "Make it easier still, if Milton were burned off the map. Hum. Doubt if the Sioux savvy Harder is behind them. No, he would work through an agent."

"Has me asking this question, Watson? Why would Harder as-pire to be lord of Sudden Range?"

"Haven't a notion," Watson confessed. "Maybe he wants a cattle empire. Still, I dunno. . . . Wouldn't have thought this li'l stretch of territory was worth all the risk."

"Nor me," Leander conceded. "I've seen plenty better cattle country that would be a lot easier to grab."

A bow-legged cowboy entered the office. "Sioux adjacent," he told Joe Watson. "Heck of a lot of the varmints a-heading this way. The news is hunkydory. Two of our scouts just hauled in."

"Here she comes," Joe Watson said. He rose from his chair, dismissed the bow-legged cowboy with a level, "Okay, and thank you, Larkin."

Ted and Leander stood up in their turn. "So Harder is still out at the Running Maverick," Leander said.

"Seems as though," Joe Watson replied. "Will talk to him like a Dutch uncle, if. . . . If the cavalry get here fast enough."

CHAPTER XIX

IRIS tip-toed over to the window of her room in the Milton Hotel. Questioned, she would have admitted that there was no advantage in moving softly. She did so at the urging of that strange impulse which leads human beings to tread on silent feet when the world around them reverberates to the rattle of musketry.

Separated from the Milton Hotel by a narrow alley was the Milton and District Saddle Emporium. Iris parted drapes that were none too clean. She rubbed tired eyes. The blank wall of the building opposite was all that she could see.

Iris knew what went on, however. Milton had been ringed for the past four hours by hostile Sioux.

Iris moved back from the window, sank into a rocking-chair. She wondered how Ted was faring. And, of course, her adored father.

He was in the next room. She must see him. When she entered his room, he was fully dressed, thumbing cartridges into the magazine of a Winchester repeater.

By his bedside was an oil-lamp, with the wick turned low. In the feeble light, he eyed his

daughter anxiously, asked, "Are you better now, honey?"

"A little," Iris told him, "but ashamed of myself. I'm afraid I've proved myself to be a shocking coward, father."

"Nonsense, my dear." Peabody's voice was gruff through stress of emotion. "I can't think of any other girl who would have survived what you have been through."

"It—it was awful." Iris sighed. "And still we haven't escaped from the—the fiends. I know they are all around us again. I heard it from the percentage girl who has been nursing me."

"Guess there is nothing to worry about this time, Iris. There are enough of us here to stand them off, and the cavalry are on their way."

Peabody strained the truth, was aware of it. Milton was in a far worse plight than he was willing to confess to his daughter.

Sober, the warriors of Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse had revealed themselves as a formidable foe. Their ponies were well-guarded on this occasion. Their approach had been slow and cautious. They had the town completely encircled. Armed with modern rifles, they were displaying devastating accuracy.

Peabody said, "I've borrowed a couple of Colts and this Winchester. I must throw lead at the Sioux. While I do so, you had better take another lie down, honey."

Iris shook her head. "I can't. I'm far too restless. I am going to help with the wounded. I shall be happier occupied."

"As you wish." Peabody saw the sense of his daughter's argument. "It's up to you, my dear."

Iris gripped him by the arm. "For my sake, you won't take any unnecessary risks. Promise, father."

"Sure won't," and Peabody kissed the girl. For a moment or so, she clung to him fervently.

"Let's go," he said, "to our posts." Iris sighed, and set him free.

Father and daughter crossed the road, on the board-walk opposite the Milton Hotel they parted company. Peabody set off for the calaboose: Iris entered the Golden Dance Hall, which had been converted into a temporary hospital.

Peabody kept to the shadows where he could. Achieving the goal without mishap, he went into Joe Watson's office. Watson was in conversation with a grim-faced Mace Kelly.

Mace Kelly's expression softened. He said, "Glad to see you, Peabody. You feeling more chipper now?"

"Considerably," Peabody answered. "And ready to fight. Watson, is there any particular place you want me to go?"

Watson studied the sheepman. Peabody showed plain evidence of savage ill-treatment at the hands of the Sioux.

"No hurry," Watson said. "Sit down. Have a rest—and a drink. Just 'fore dawn they may come at us—hard as they can go."

"Can do with a snort," Peabody confessed. Arms on the back, seated wrong way about, he possessed himself of a chair.

Given whisky, Peabody raised his glass. "One good thing has come out of this business. Nice to know you and I won't ever fight again, Kelly."

The Treble 3 owner nodded. "We surely won't. Losing your buildings and herders was mighty bad luck. And the sheep the Sioux wiped out. Say, if you find yourself short on cash, me and my two brothers will be plumb happy to see you through."

Peabody was deeply moved. "I dare say I can manage, but. . . . Oh, heck, but I shan't forget your kindness, Kelly."

"Aw, shucks, is nothing," Mace Kelly said hastily.

Watson intervened. "Will be Jake to have peace in Sudden Range. Gives us an extra reason to see the deadwood isn't put on us by the murdering Sioux."

"And the chances?" Peabody queried. "Good or bad, Watson? How do they add up, would you say?"

"Fair to—maybe—middling," Watson drawled. "They outnumber us a little, but the way they shoot is what troubles me. Shading some of our

fellers. Inflicting on us too darn-a-many casualties."

Peabody was silent, thinking of Iris. His example proved contagious. Joe Watson and Mace Kelly were suddenly silent, too.

On the flat roof of the calaboose, Ted and Leander scanned the surrounding terrain for prowling Sioux. They saw none. The two men experienced grudging admiration for the crafty warriors of Yellow Horse and Crazy Bear.

There was cover available round the town. Every bush, every thicket, every dip in the ground, tree-trunks and boulders, each might be the hiding-place of a skulking foe. Worse still, in the near distance, a disused but still strong building, provided the Sioux with most valuable shelter.

Leander ducked, as a bullet whined above him, missing his head by a mere inch or so. Ted, too, had a narrow escape from death, when a slug hit the parapet, showering splinters into his hair.

He cursed, said laconically, "They will get one of us from that blame building 'fore the night is through."

Dale Leander grunted assent. The edifice in question had been a church in the long ago. Abandoned for lack of patronage, it had been left to the mercy of time and decay.

Leander raised his Stetson on the barrel of a Colt. The ancient stratagem succeeded,

drew the enemy fire. With two neat holes bored through the crown, Leander lowered it ruefully.

He laughed without mirth. "Better go down and have a word with Watson, Ted. We haven't a chance. Some of those devils are perched up in the tower."

Ted began to wriggle backwards across the roof, having murmured, "As you say."

Followed by Leander, he went through an open trap-door and down a ladder. The pair entered Watson's office. Watson, Mace Kelly and Seth Peabody were still there.

Joe Watson looked up. "Waal?" "Ain't waal. Far from it. No dice a-tall," Ted told him dolefully.

"The feather-dusters have the drop on us," he added. "Some of them in the tower of the old church yonder."

Watson pulled a face. "My fault for leaving it, I guess. Heck, I never should of allowed sentiment to get on top of me."

"That you shouldn't," Mace Kelly interjected. "Should have burned it or something 'fore the Sioux struck here."

"Still to do," Leander reasoned. "Is like a gun-barrel pointed into a feller's spine. They can snipe at almost every part of the town from way up there."

Watson bit hard at the stem of his pipe. He

had made a mistake, was willing to admit his error.

There were other considerations beside that Leander had raised. Not only could the Sioux use the tower as a sniping-point, but they could gather in and around the building itself, rush from it in a howling mob in the darkest interval before dawn paled the sky.

"Listen, fellers," Joe Watson said, "I didn't like the notion of harming a church—don't much like it now."

Mace Kelly cleared his throat. "The war-whoops are creeping all round us," he said, "on their bellies: When the moon goes down, they won't be far off. Bet they rush in. 'Thout illumination, they're going to take some goldurned stopping, too."

Ted whistled. "Lovely dove, but we may get all the doggone illumination we want—if they set this burg on fire."

Mace Kelly shrugged broad shoulders. "'At is what I was coming to."

"Which gives me a idea," he continued, heeded intently by his audience of four. "Suppose we set the church blazing first. Would give us all the light we need. If we can hold off the Sioux till the sun shines, we can fight through another day."

"And a night," he added, "if so be our fire will smoulder sufficient to see us through the evening darkness till the moon peeps through."

"But for the matter of how to set light to the church," was Joe Watson's verdict, "your notion is something of a lapaloozer."

"Ain't got round to that yet," Mace Kelly said doubtfully.

Leander said, "To try and crawl near the church while the moon is up would be fatal, I allow. Leave it till dark, it may be too late. Yeah, the building could be stiff with Sioux."

"What I'm afraid of," Joe Watson observed. "They might make their biggest rush from it. Is almost certain that is what they will do."

The conversation languished, died. The five occupants of Joe Watson's office thought hard. Outside, the peace of a moonlight night was destroyed as opposing snipers continued their duel remorselessly.

Bullets plocked into the walls of the calaboose. Ted sighed. "Sure is a pity," he remarked. "Was wishing we could make a bow big enough to shoot fire-arrows at the church the way the old-time Injuns used to do."

"Don't make sense. Quit joshing," Mace Kelly said, then glanced round in surprise at the sheepman when Peabody murmured, "Ah."

When all eyes were on him, Peabody spoke. "Fire-arrows are off," he argued, "but there is something similar we could surely do."

He paused to consider further. Joe Watson said, "Do tell."

"Bottle bombs, filled with kerosene," Peabody explained slowly. "Fused with bits of lighted rag. Thrown to burst against the church. Would only need one hit, I calculate—because that old building must be dry as tinder."

Ted said, "It would be a fine notion, if we could only pitch the blame missiles that far."

"Eureka!" Mace Kelly whistled. "Tell you what. A sling would do it. The sort of sling I was a hot number with as a boy."

"Or a catapult built on a wood frame," Leander suggested. "If there's time to build it, and I doubt that there will be."

Joe Watson glanced at his watch. "There won't, and the Sioux snipers would pick us off while we set it in position," he stated decisively.

"Same is true of the slings," Joe Watson went on. "Anyone trying that game would be slammed full of slugs in half a jiffy."

Peabody held up an imperative hand. "Let me finish," he said, "and I'll tell you just what we can do."

CHAPTER XX

BELLAMY resembled for a moment a grinning wolf. "Guess you'll be better now—any durn moment, Lance," he suggested to Harder.

"Depends on the next news I get," Harder said. He began to chew at the appropriate end of an unlit cigar.

The two were once again in the living-room of the Running Maverick. Between them were the inevitable bottle and tumblers. The only change in the room lay in its being dirtier than ever.

Bellamy drawled, "Dirk is a mighty long while a-coming. Don't look like he had an easy job catching up with them two." " —

Harder removed his cigar, spat accurately towards a handy cuspidor. "Don't cotton to that part to any extent. Wonder just who in tarnation them same bustards could be."

Bellamy scratched his nose with a black-edged finger-nail. "Me, I'd say they was a coupla bim-bos on the dodge. Betting is they took me and the boys for a conblasted posse."

Harder frowned. "It was night, so they maybe done so. Will save a lot of trouble, if that is the answer."

Bellamy nodded. Harder pondered. Vague doubts stirred in his mind. Not conscience, but fear of sudden unexpected Nemesis seemed to whisper in his ear.

Bellamy was a sharp and ruthless tool. Bellamy was an owl-hoot. Bellamy was a renegade, too.

Renegades were all right so far as they went, but liquor-peddling to Indians was an occupation filled with danger. Suppose Bellamy had been spied upon, had blundered. That would account for the two mysterious strangers. And their flight a trick. Visualising unpleasant possibilities, Harder's scowl became a grimace of pure ferocity.

Bellamy saw it, and was startled. "Judas Priest, Lance," he exclaimed, "but what is biting you?"

"Then two jaspers, Sneed. Be awkward was they part of some U.S. Marshal's mob that had been keeping tabs on you."

The bearded Bellamy all but dropped his glass. "For the love of Pete," he protested, "if that ain't just a crazy idea!"

"For why?" Harder queried. "How can you tell the authorities ain't long suspicioned certain things of you?"

Bellamy was dismayed, then recovered. "Aw, nuts, Lance. No haff-baked bunch of John-laws could ever have pulled a stunt like that on me."

"Goshamighty, ain't I been dodging them sort of ornery fools for years?" he added acidly.

"Give you that," Harder conceded. "Still, all

law-men ain't foolish. Heck, but if Dirk Ralton and them rode into a trap. And if the Sioux was rounded up just after you left 'em, then. . . . By all the suffering snakes there is, the fat will be conblasted waal in the flaming fire."

Bellamy shook his head. "That is all doggone nonsense, Lance. Dirk never went into no ambush or such. You can take that from me."

Harder reached for the bottle, stayed his hand. "Listen," he said. "Hosses. Plenty of them. Heading this way."

Bellamy, too, heard the thud of approaching hooves. He crossed to the window, gazed out through the dirty glass. "You can relax, Lance," he said over his shoulder. "It is Dirk and the boys okay."

Harder relaxed as suggested. Bellamy said, "Be with you in a minute, Lance," went out into the night.

When he returned, he had Dirk Ralton with him. Ralton was stiff and saddle-weary. Having shaken hands with Harder, he helped himself to a tumbler of neat whisky, allowed the fiery spirit to course down his throat.

He smacked his lips, then tilted the bottle. Watched by Harder and Bellamy, he measured himself another liberal dose.

Outside, familiar sounds indicated that the outlaws who had ridden in with Ralton were unsaddling and preparing to camp. Other sounds made

it clear that the Running Maverick hands were emerging from the bunkhouse. There ensued coarse banter and loud laughter, rendering it plain that hard-shell cowboys and villainous renegades were fraternising amicably enough.

Ralton took a chair. "I got plenty to tell," he said. "Yeah, plenty. You two gents wisful for me to report?"

Harder nodded encouragingly. Bellamy said, "You can bet your life."

Ralton fixed wicked eyes on Bellamy. "Them two hellions we put up, Sneed, soon give us the slip. Dunno how, but I allow they got round behind us some early in the chase.

"Artful bustards. Tumbled to what had done gone wrong in the morning. Swung a wide loop to look for them, but had no tarnation luck. Wasn't so much as a scratch on the ground. No, the dirty sons must have tied blanket over the hoofs of their brons."

Ralton had fresh recourse to the bottle. Frowning in terrific concentration, he drew the back of a hand across his vicious mouth.

"I come to this conclusion," Ralton then went on. "Seemed to me them two side-winders was gents on the dodge. Mistook us and the boys for a posse, Sneed. Yeah, bet them two was dim trail riders. Had all the hall-marks and. . . . Only a coupla owl-hoots could ever have shook off an old bird like me."

The theory appeared to hold water. Bellamy nodded contentedly. Harder sighed his relief.

"Didn't fret too much at losing them bimbos," Ralton resumed, "but con-cen-trat-ed on finding out what I could 'bout things in general instead. You hadn't given me no di-rect orders, Sneed, but was obvious you and Harder here would want to know just what was going on.

"Waal, me and the boys pirooted around till we come to what was left of the Lazy S. Goshamighty, but you should ought to have lamped the ruins. Buiklings in ashes. Dead mutton. Dead chile-eaters. Corpses all over the place. Had them Sioux made a fine job of the massacre? Yeah. They should smile."

Harder almost purred like some sleek cat. "A wipe-out of the Lazy S—huh! Gee, but that is swell news."

Ralton's laugh was callous. "Never wasted no time at the Lazy S. Didn't see no sign of Peabody and his daughter, but reckon they was charred some when the buildings burned. Or maybe the Sioux done carted them off. Figured they had some prisoners anyways. Was a coupla stakes in the earth adjacent. Nobody hadn't been tortured at them though, so likely Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse decided they hadn't no spare time."

"Could be," Harder assented. "You carry on, then Sneed and we will tell you two-three facts to add on to yours."

"Okay. Waal, like I said, me and the boys ' never lally-gagged 'mong the Lazy S ruins. Was doggone sign 'all over the shop—would ha' taken months to read.

"We pushes on towards Milton, when we was kitty-corner from it heard the popping of guns. There we halts, and I sends on Cheyenne Charlie, who is a first-chop scout like most any other haff-breed. He comes back to say the Sioux had hit Milton, was plenty busy be-sieg-ing the dolgurned town."

Ralton paused, reached for the bottle. Harder said, "Guess you earned a barr'l full of rot-gut. Go to it, brother. You surely used your savvy, surely brung in splendid news."

"Ain't much else to it," Ralton returned. "Cheyenne Charlie is no slouch. He reckoned Milton was for the sports, that the Sioux would mighty soon be topsides of the burg."

Ralton subsided. Bellamy eyed him with satisfaction. Harder rubbed his hands together, said, "Now I will wise you up, brother, to the other angles.

"Had my ear to the ground a bit, too. The Ranchers' 'Sociation pays a hostile visit to the Lazy S after the Rocking Y ep-is-ode. Was one heck of a shindig when they and Peabody locked horns. Left both weak. Was 'in-con-clus-ive. A armistice was sorter arranged.

"Next, while the Lazy S was being cut up, Joe

Watson finds out somehow that them yelling savages is around. Waal, he sends riders to the ranches, asking us all to head *mity pronto* for Milton and fort up in the burg.

"Which, of course, I never done. Jumping crow, but is all on the up and up. The Lazy S gone. Milton next. With most everybody in it to be butchered, will surely leave us sitting purty as lords of Sudden Range."

"Sounds hunkydory," Bellamy said. "Bet Watson has sent to Fort Angel for the cavalry, but they got no more chance than a snowball in hell of making Milton in time."

Ralton guffawed. "We can afford to laff. And why not take a pasaer to Milton with our mob. With luck the Sioux will be up and gone by then. Me, Bellamy and the gang fade out when the sojers come. You, Harder, you cry your eyes out, 'cause you was too late to save Milton from them howling red fiends."

CHAPTER XXI

THE last of the moon, and darkness arrived almost imperceptibly. Men who were red and men who were white tensed in the gloom, certain that the crucial hour was at hand—or half-hour, it might be.

Snake-fashion the Sioux moved forward, tightening the ring about Milton, the town they were minded to destroy.

Inside the defences, tired eyes strained to penetrate the surrounding dark. Nervous fingers subjected triggers to the first pressure.

Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse worked to a plan. A large band of their warriors converged on the ruined church, moving softly on moccasined feet. Revealing the tireless patience of their race, they avoided the slightest betraying sound, scarcely needing their leaders' injunction not to hurry.

Stealthy as any Indian, Ted and Leander were out of Milton and heading for the ruined church. Each had a bottle of kerosene fused with rag. Each had matches in his pocket to set the rag afire.

The friends understood the risk they ran, and that time was the essence of their contract. Somehow or other they had to ignite the ruined church

before they were enveloped and cut to pieces by the prowling Sioux.

Behind them a section of the barricades was drawn aside. Behind that again, twenty men were statuesque on horses whose hooves were muffled. One of these had Ted's dun gelding on a halter. Another was responsible for Leander's Palamino.

Ted's mouth was dry, and his pulses raced. So loud in his ears was the beating of his heart, that it seemed to him some possible lurking enemy must hear.

Perhaps because he was an older man, Leander was the calmer of the two. And he set the course, holding Ted by the sleeve. His eyes were on the faint loom of the building it was essential to consume with fire.

Somewhere in the near distance came the hoot of an owl. But the call was at ground level. No owl was responsible for the sound, but one of the Sioux.

Sweat started out on Ted's forehead. Iris was among those in Milton who might die if he and Leander failed in what they had to do.

Leander thought only in terms of success. He had studied the terrain in front of the church before the moon went down. Between church and threatened Milton — throwing a slow-moving shadow—he had noticed a tree.

A stunted spruce with spreading branches. So Joe Watson had informed Leander. The range

detective purposed to reach it in the shortest space possible.

Submerged instincts or uncanny judgment served him in good stead. Despite the pre-dawn blackness, he achieved his goal, halted, with Ted beside him, listened intently.

He heard nothing to alarm him. Stooping, he groped, touched a cold corpse, felt the dead face of a second. The bodies were those of Sioux, who had been shot from the higher branches by snipers in the town more accurate than they.

Leander inclined his head, breathed below a whisper, "Okay, Ted, now."

Four hands worked with swift precision. Two matches flared. Two strips of rag caught fire. The night was torn by frenzied howls. Two powerful arms sent kerosene bottles hurtling out and away as far as they could throw.

After that event was thick and fast. The twenty riders charged out of Milton. Maddened Sioux ran towards Ted and Leander, whooping their loudest and discharging their rifles—but by then the ruined church was blazing fiercely.

Both the rag-fused bottles had found their mark, to explode on impact and scatter oil to ignite instantly. The dry as tinder walls roared into flame. The angry tongues stretched upwards, reaching for the tower.

Ted and Leander retreated towards the oncoming horsemen, both they and their would-be

rescuers outlined clearly by the light of the fire. Ted dropped two advancing Sioux in swift succession. Colts rising and falling pointing-finger-fashion, Leander accounted for two more.

Seconds later, the two friends were encircled. A knife scraped across Ted's left forearm. A tomahawk bit savagely into Leander's right shoulder.

Ted killed the man who had wounded him. Leander shot his assailant in the stomach. The twenty yelling horsemen rode furiously in among the Sioux.

They broke and fled in confusion. Ted saw his dun gelding, swung himself gratefully into his saddle.

More awkwardly, because his shoulder was paining him and bleeding badly, Leander hoisted himself aboard his Palamino. With several of their number stark on the ground behind them, the rescue party closed about the rescued, galloped headlong back towards the gap in the barricade.

The flames of the burning building illuminated the territory around it, did much to relieve the darkness on the three other sides of the town. The Sioux raced in from all four directions. Many were dropped in their tracks. Others reached the defences, however, and a bitter hand-to-hand struggle ensued.

Back in Milton, the men who had saved Ted and Leander sprang down from their saddles,

joined in the fight. Ted entered the battle with them, although blood was trickling down his injured arm. By contrast, Leander leaned weakly against a neighbouring building, could do no more than manipulate a Colt in his left hand.

Both sides lost heavily in the *melée*, but gradually the stronger physique of the white defenders told. Moreover, they knew that the lives of women and children depended on them. They produced that extra ounce of ruthless endeavour, thus offsetting the natural ferocity of their savage foes.

When a rifle-butt had crashed into his face, Yellow Horse staggered out of the conflict, spitting broken teeth and clasping a broken nose. His retirement bred something of panic among the ~~braves~~. At the point where occurred the gap in the barricade, they turned and took to their heels.

As suddenly, the Sioux attack diminished on the other sides of the town. Warrior after warrior lost heart and fled. Silence descended on Milton, a silence that was uncanny compared with the noise of shooting, cursing and a host of warlike yells.

Joe Watson and a number of other defenders worked like beavers until the gap in the defences was repaired. The horses of the rescue party were led away to shelter in the nearest livery barn.

Ted went over to Leander. Leander said, "Sorry not to be much use, Ted, but the war-whoop who got me cut me right to the bone."

Ted, too, was limp and exhausted. He started

stupidly at the blood which dripped to the ground from his wounded forearm.

Seth Peabody appeared beside him. "You did fine, you two," he commended. "Now string along with me and have your hurts treated."

Supporting each other, Ted and Leander accompanied the sheepman to the Golden Dance Hall. Inside the building, Leander sat on a chair. Doc Harris, the town medico, began to dress his wounded shoulder, assisted in his efforts by a pretty percentage girl.

Ted found himself in another chair in another part of the room. Iris came smiling towards him, carrying a bowl of hot water, and with a towel and bandages draped over one arm.

She laid down the bowl, and said, "You're hurt, Mr. Kelly," used scissors to cut away the appropriate portion of Ted's blood-soaked shirt-sleeve.

Ted submitted to her ministrations as though in a dream. A dazed but contented mortal, he studied the scene in the crowded hall.

Everywhere were wounded men, some in chairs like himself, some prone on mattresses, a few standing unaided, the rest with backs propped against the walls of the room.

Ted's gaze came to rest on Leander. Leander went white and set his teeth when Doc Harris slopped Friar's balsam on to his gaping wound.

Iris, too, employed a benzoin-based mixture.

Taken by surprise, Ted yelped and emitted a startled oath at the sudden biting pain. He blushed, said confusedly, "Gee, Miss Peabody, but I sure am sorry 'bout that unpleasant word."

He raised his head. Iris was laughing. She said, "You're safe. Swear if you want to. Nothing else matters."

There followed a spell of silence while Iris went deftly to work with a roll of bandage. Ted found his voice, spoke on a low note, "Miss Peabody, no, Miss Iris, I. . . . Heck, but it's plumb wonderful to think you care whether I'm dead or alive."

"But of course I do," Iris told him. "And won't you call me Iris? But perhaps you don't like the name."

"Don't like the name!" Ted sighed heavily. "If there is any sweeter, waal, it's one I never heard."

Iris was suddenly demure, with the merry twinkle gone from her grey eyes. Ted was as solemn. He captured and squeezed the girl's left hand.

"When this shindig is over," he said, "you and I will talk again. I dunno—but maybe. . . . Hope I ain't entering no fool's paradise."

Iris leaned forward and whispered, "There isn't any fear of that, Ted." And then she moved away from him, laden with the bowl, what remained of the bandages and the blood-stained towel.

Ted sighed happily, rose to his feet, then left

the building, with the gap in his open shirt acting as a resting-place for the hand of his injured arm. Outside, the sun was shining. Ted walked as though on air, more careless than ever of the bullets which whined over Milton, fired by the rifles of the Sioux snipers.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see Joe Watson. Holding him by the elbow, Joe Watson piloted him through the bat-wing doors of the Lucky Girl Saloon.

At the bar were Mace Kelly, Ralph and Hank. Ted was greeted warmly by his three cousins. He was presently in possession of a glass of whisky and an enormous meat sandwich.

Joe Watson and the Kelly Brothers talked together. Ted munched and sipped as appropriate, content for the nonce to enact the role of audience.

"Was a fine fire," Mace Kelly said. "Caught them Sioux on the hop more than somewhat. When she goes up, quite a few of them pesky critturs was obliged to fling theirselves from the tower to the ground."

"But burning too fast," Joe Watson suggested. "Won't be a glimmer left by nightfall. That ain't so good, boys."

"Sure ain't," Ralph Kelly agreed lugubriously. "Just 'fore moon-up we'll be in tall trouble. The red bustards ain't done with us, and there likely won't be no stopping them next time."

CHAPTER XXII

“WE won’t ever make it, Stan,” Brit Hartnell complained. “This cayuse of mine is nigh all in. Me, too, I ’bout had a bellyful. Nope, we ain’t ever going to get to Fort Angel in time.”

A rotund man, but tough, for all his fat, he was one of Joe Watson’s two chosen messengers. He was astride a raw-boned grey gelding. The animal was tired.

Stan Lovibond, his companion, was short, thin and wiry, with squinted blue eyes. On his upper lip was a moustache of walrus pattern. The blaze-faced grulla gelding which bore him was flagging as much as the mount of his friend.

Lovibond spat through a gap in his teeth. “What will happen if we don’t make the riffle don’t bear thinking of,” he observed.

“Sure don’t,” Hartnell assented. “Conblast and double-conblast all them stinking Injuns.”

Gloom had its way with the weary pair. In a state of dejected silence, they covered the next few miles.

The country through which they travelled was barren to match their mood. Near desert, it was studded with weird-shaped cactus which threw

even more bizarre shadows across the surface of the sand.

Lethargically, the horses plodded on, flinging up fine particles to irritate their drooping riders. Cursing monotonously, Hartnell and Lovibond obscured mouths and nostrils with faded scarves. In their wake, unobtrusive as sly ghosts, three Sioux trailed Lovibond and Hartnell, reading sign with consummate ease, gazing down from the backs of well-trained war-ponies.

Swift Panther, Leaping Elk and Swimming Fish, they were stragglers from Crazy Bear's fierce band. Sent out as scouts, they had been unable to resist the temptation to follow the tracks the mounts of Lovibond and Hartnell had left on the ground. The trio of braves scented scalps to be taken. Even the possible future wrath of Crazy Bear had proved powerless to hold them back from the path which to them seemed predestined.

With the cunning born in their race, they had no intention of risking their lives. They preferred to wait until their proposed victims slumbered, then creep up on them unawares.

But Lovibond and Hartnell showed no desire to sleep. They continued doggedly towards Fort Angel. With commensurate tenacity the Sioux warriors clung to their trail.

Some twenty miles ahead, two squadrons of the 7th U.S. Cavalry Regiment were bivouacked,

detached from Fort Angel, and just having completed the first stage of a long and arduous summer exercise.

Two days and two nights in the saddle and left troopers, officers and their respective chargers exhausted. Tired men relaxed as the cooks set to work. Bored pickets kept red-eyed vigil around the camp and among the horse-lines.

Major Willoughby lounged in the sun. With him were Captains Smith and Enderby, Lieutenants Harrison and Miles.

Willoughby remarked, "You know, gentlemen, life is dull for a soldier these days."

"War is a soldier's business," he added, "and without a war. . . ." He shrugged. "A soldier gets slack." He tugged at his sweeping line of moustache. As he did so, his four juniors reflected that the "Old Man" was astride his favourite hobby-horse again.

While Major Willoughby held forth on the topic nearest his heart, Hartnell and Lovibond came in sight of an outsize hogsback which curved upwards unexpectedly, to run for some five miles. The two men chose the right of it, not greatly attracted by the prospect of riding past either of its cottonwood- and chaparral - covered sides.

Conversely, Swift Panther and his two fellow-braves saw in the hogsback an inspired opportunity. Their war-ponies were fresher than the

mounts of the whites. The Sioux kicked and goaded the tireless creatures to a distance-devouring canter.

The plan possessed all the simplicity of genius. Let the Sioux reach the far end of the hogsback first and they could lay an ambush for their hated foes. Accordingly, they bent low in their blanket saddles, hidden by the hogsback from Lovibond and Hartnell.

Arrived at their destination on the left of the hogsback, the Sioux sprang to the ground. Leaping Elk took charge of the ponies. Swimming Fish and Swift Panther ascended the neighbouring slope, with rifles at the trail.

Looking right, they saw Hartnell and Lovibond approaching with all the carelessness of worn-out men, quite unsuspecting of danger. The two braves assumed a firing position, little bodies inclined below the summit of the hogsback, and concealed by the chaparral.

It was then that the notes of a bugle sounded unmistakably on the air. Swimming Fish and Swift Panther glanced to the left. When they saw columns of smoke from many fires, the blood-lust went out of them. They grunted gutturally in dismay.

Cavalry. The hated long-knives were in the vicinity. A shot would bring them at the gallop. The minds of Swimming Fish and Swift Panther worked as one. They slithered down the slope, out

of sight, rose erect, ran to where Leaping Elk waited with the three ponies.

Explanations were terse, and presently the trio were riding away from the scene of their abandoned project to ambush Lovibond and Hartnell. Their new aim was much more urgent. Even if they killed their ponies, they had to travel their fastest to Milton and warn Crazy Bear.

And fear was in their savage hearts. It seemed to them certain that before they could reach their leader, they must be overhauled and cut down by the cavalry.

Nearing the end of the hogsback on their side, Lovibond and Hartnell in their turn saw the smoke of many fires. Lovibond lifted his drooping head. "Goshamighty," he muttered, "what we done? More Injuns on the war-path? Is that what we done bumped into?"

"The Lord forbid, Stan," Hartnell answered. "But we can't afford to take no chances. Nope, ain't nothing else for it but to lead our cayuses kinder cautious for a whiles."

"Holy cow," Lovibond lamented. "By grab, Brit, but I'm nigh wore out now."

Nevertheless, he and his companion resigned themselves to the inevitable. On foot, they continued their journey. They hated walking with all the intensity of men almost born in the saddle. Fatigue and inertia pegged them down to a snail's pace, a pace slower than that their mounts could

have maintained—foam-flecked and jaded though the poor creatures were.

The fancied necessity to advance in the manner of enemy scouts in hostile territory, delayed Hartnell and Lovibond even more. It was two very jaundiced men who were eventually escorted by armed troopers into the presence of Major Willoughby.

Willoughby punctuated their story with an explosive oath, seized Hartnell by the shoulders and rocked the amazed man to and fro.

Then,

“By God,” the major shouted, “but this is the devil! Not a fresh charger or trooper in my command! Exhausted by hours of hard slogging. The Lord Harry knows when we shall see Milton! Not much sooner than if you two fellows had had to ride all the way to Fort Angel!”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE day dragged on interminably. Joe Watson was a worried man. The defenders of Milton had lost heavily in the fighting of the previous night. Many of their best shots were dead or wounded. Their plight was still serious, although they had succeeded in repulsing the Sioux.

Yellow Horse bore the pain of broken nose and broken teeth with stoic endeavour. Nevertheless, he was content to rest, to leave the command of operations to the uninjured Crazy Bear.

That wily chief was optimistic, convinced that before dawn of the next morning Milton would be in the hands of his warriors. He retained belief in his original plan. He was sure that a mass attack under cover of darkness would bring him victory.

What had once been a church was a heap of lifeless ash. Looking out towards it from the roof of the calaboose, Joe Watson was sad. A man of strong religious convictions, he read his Bible daily.

Switching his mind to more mundane matters, he studied the dispositions of the Sioux. A ring of artfully concealed snipers was in constant action. Out of range, the bulk of the war-party took its ease, however.

Mace Kelly was in charge of the northern defences. Ralph Kelly was responsible for the southern barricades. Hank Kelly overlorded it in the east. The west accepted orders from Ted Kelly.

The ladder creaked behind Joe Watson. Someone crawled into position beside him. It was Seth Peabody.

Joe Watson greeted the sheepman with a laconic, "War sure is hell, brother, as Sherman used to say."

Peabody nodded. His eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep. His features were drawn and grey.

"All the fighting Kellys got a job," Joe Watson drawled, then queried, "How is Dale Leander now?"

"Some feverish, but full of guts," was Peabody's reply.

The Sioux were systematic in their sniping. Watson and Peabody were silent, as bullets plucked into the barricaded parapet behind which they lay.

The danger past, Joe Watson said, "If them devils was to play it 'cording to the book, they would come at us just 'fore the sun peeps through. But, me, I got a notion they ain't overmuchly concerned with sticking strict to what their stinking ancestors used to do."

Again Peabody nodded. "No, they will hit us

this evening for a million," came his trenchant answer.

"Will probably pull it off," Joe Watson said. "Don't want to de-press you, but that is how it seems to me."

Peabody's third nod was incisive. He offered no spoken comment, however.

Watson recalled what Leander had told him regarding Lance Harder. Suspicion, supported by circumstantial evidence, the whole adding up to the belief that the Running Maverick rancher was the reincarnation of Luke Hornby. The theory held water without a doubt. Joe Watson shook his head dolefully.

Galling to be at the mercy of such a brute. It was easy to picture Harder seated in his ranch house, and grinning wickedly. While the Sioux did his dirty work for him. That was about the length of it. In his mind, Joe Watson swore luridly.

The assault would materialise soon after dark, before the moon had a chance to show itself in the sky. Sioux who had rested would hurl themselves at weary men. The Indians were deadly fighters at close quarters. Moreover, the advantage in numbers was still in their favour.

Joe Watson began to meditate on the difference between the whites defending Milton and the war-like Sioux. The Americans were blessed with the stouter physique, were capable of great endurance, had animal courage of the highest order.

As against that, the Sioux were wiry and tireless. Without imagination. Without bowels of compassion. They were liable to panic in the face of defeat, but were the most ruthless and cunning enemies when things were going their way.

Peabody meditated on similar lines. He said, "I don't much like it, Watson. If it wasn't for the women and children, we might try and stage a break-through."

"Nary a chance," Joe Watson returned. "Wimmen and kids is pleasant enough where they belong, but, my grief-a-goshen, they are one flaming handicap when the bullets fly."

"How right you are," Seth Peabody said. He manipulated a live shell into the breach of his rifle, showed himself for an instant to take a snap-shot at a sniping Sioux.

"Missed," he complained. "They're quick as lizards. Keep down, Watson. They'll be sending slugs this way."

"And how," Joe Watson assented, then growled between his teeth, "Would give every cent in Wall Street to present them all with a one-way ticket to hell."

While Peabody and Watson lay side-by-side on the roof of the calaboose, Dale Leander occupied a mattress in the Golden Dance Hall. His eyes were hot and misty. His throat was parched. His skin was taut and burning. He cursed the toma-

hawk blade whose vicious bite had filled his veins with fever.

Iris came to kneel beside him. She moistened his lips with water, made use of a sponge to wipe the perspiration gently from his aching brow.

Leander smiled gratefully at the girl. "Thanks," he said. "Get me my duds, Miss Peabody, please. Guess I ought to be getting out of this any moment now."

"You're not strong enough to move yet," Iris protested. "Mr. Leander, your wound is septic. You must be sensible."

"Not quite the time for sense," Leander replied. He levered his suffering body up on an elbow.

Iris pressed a cool hand against his cheek. "Mr. Leander, don't spoil all my careful nursing—please. Ted will never forgive me, if I let you have your way."

Leander sank back on the mattress. "Ted is awfully fond of you," Iris told her patient artlessly.

"And of you," Leander riposted. "I wish you both every joy."

Iris blushed, not through any false modesty, but because it surprised her to find that the gaunt and haggard Leander was possessed of the secret she had imagined only Ted and herself to share.

"But how on earth did you guess that . . . ?" she began, then, still blushing prettily, turned her head away.

Leander laughed. "I have eyes, which I use," he responded. "I guess I was born with some ears I can depend on, too."

The red in the girl's cheeks crimsoned. "Oh," she said in confusion, then, "You must promise to be good, Mr. Leander. I am going off duty now."

Not wishing to lie to Iris, Leander drew the rough blanket covering him up to his chin, relaxed, and closed his eyes. Iris gazed down at him in indecision, came to the conclusion that he was too weak to move, and that, therefore, there was nothing to fear.

She went out to seek rest in another room. She was worn out with long hours of work and strain. Almost at the breaking point, she was only saved from final collapse by the sheer inertia that fatigue had clamped on her brain. Even the shooting had become monotonous. She was no longer alarmed by the occasional war-whoops of the encircling Sioux.

She swayed slightly as she made her exit. Leander watched her go.

He felt weak enough in all conscience, but he had no intention of remaining bed-ridden, fever or no fever. Every man who could stand must take part in the defence of Milton. The crisis would come with darkness. His duty was plain, and he had an outstanding account to settle with the Sioux.

His bed was in a corner. In vest and under-pants, he struggled out from under the blanket, found his feet, lurched to where his other clothes were piled on the floor.

It cost him considerable effort to dress. When it was done, he was shaken and sweating, but he had managed it somehow.

He buckled on his gun-belt, took up his Winchester and leaned on it. His head cleared a little. His tall frame obeyed the orders his brain signalled. He walked heavily towards the door.

No one sought to hinder him. Achieving the board-walk beyond the Golden Dance Hall, he leaned against the building to rest a moment. Exertion was already telling on him, and he had yet to accustom himself again to the fresher outside air.

He considered, recalling a visit he had had from Seth Peabody earlier in the day.

Where was Ted's post? At the western side of Milton. Leander turned his steps in that direction, lurching perceptibly.

Ted saw him coming, ran to meet him. Leander submitted gladly to an arm about his waist, was even more glad to assume a sitting position at the base of a sandbag wall that was loopholed here and there.

"You're mad, Dale," Ted protested. "How come Iris let you quit the dance hall. She gone plumb loco, too?"

Leander smiled up at the man who leaned over him. "Not so, Ted." He went on to explain. "Not so, Ted. Guess I have to be in at the finish, and unless I miss my bet, the finish ain't far away."

Ted opened his mouth, shut it again, shook his head pensively. "Come darkness there will be trouble," he confessed. "You got notions to die with your boots on. Okay, okay, okay."

Sioux bullets smacked into the sandbags. Others whined shrilly above them. Neither Ted nor Leander flinched. Familiarity had bred contempt in them, contempt of Sioux marksmanship, accurate though it might be.

Ted knelt at a lower loophole, to return the enemy fire. "Take a hand in a minute," Leander said, "when I have rested up some more."

"No hurry, Dale," Ted responded. "With all the many hurt we've had, be glad of you later though."

Leander rested his head against a sandbag, let his body sag. Eyes closed, he reflected that what Ted said was true. Milton had suffered more casualties than the number of its defenders could bear.

He had left the Golden Dance Hall crowded with wounded. Other buildings had their quota of injured. He owed the knowledge to Seth Peabody, plus the information that the Milton Universal Stores had been converted into a central mortuary.

Leander dozed. Beside him, Ted shot devastatingly with his Winchester at the skulking Sioux.

Cartridge into the breech. Preliminary squeeze. Final pressure. Butt-plate bucking against his shoulder-blade. Another live shell into position. Magazine to be refilled and sights adjusted, as and when necessary.

Ted's green eyes were solemn. The smell of cordite was perpetual in his nostrils. It occurred to him that he was going through the firing motions with no more of animation than an automaton might show.

His thoughts were centred on Iris, against a subconscious surge of hatred directed at the Sioux. He had accounted for seven already. Before he was killed, he hoped to account for at least as many more.

There was no optimism in him. Fort Angel was too far off to permit the cavalry to appear in time. Furthermore, there was the melancholy possibility that Joe Watson's two messengers had fallen foul of and been slaughtered by the Sioux.

His love for Iris was sheer physical pain. To love and lose seemed destined to be his portion. And if Iris fell into the hands of Crazy Bear, then. . . . He was guilty of an involuntary groan. Beads of sweat bedewed his brow.

Leander woke, raised lack-lustre eyes to the darkening sky. The fever in his blood made speech an effort. He fought against his weakness,

· muttered, "Won't be light to see in a minute. This could be it, I allow."

"Yeah," Ted riposted grimly. "This *could* be it, *amigo*."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE darkness seemed to press down like leaden weights. The air was oppressive, the night very still. It was then that both the Sioux and the defenders of Milton sensed the first indications of impending change.

A hot breeze, a mere ripple from the south-west began to stir the dust in the streets of the threatened town. Ted's memory went back an hour or so, reminding him of the cloud he had seen in the far distance, a cloud then no bigger than a man's hand.

"Lovely dove," he said in a whisper, "sure smells like a doggone storm."

"That would save us till it blew over," Leander said, and he added, "Praise the Lord."

Storms gathered quickly, struck fast in that region, terrific electrical disturbances, accompanied by lashing rain and a howling gale. Lightning flickered suddenly overhead. The breeze became an ugly wind. The first large spots of moisture descended from the skies.

Ted said, "We're going to need slickers. By grab, here she comes."

The heavens above exploded to lend justification to his words. Milton was lit by vivid flashes.

The wind achieved gale fury. The vanguard of a cloudburst poured down on the world.

Caught without protection, the Sioux who were creeping in on Milton were drenched in a matter of seconds, gasped like stranded fish, fled in all directions, seeking what shelter they could find.

Nor did their white adversaries fare any better. In the open behind the barricades and similar defences, they were all but drowned.

War ceased to be a practical proposition. Balls of fire made the horizon a thing of frightening beauty, ran crackling along on reaching the earth, to apparently vanish into the ground. Here and there a tree was uprooted, became the sport of the strong fingers of the gale.

Soaked to the skin, Leander experienced relief from the fever that still boiled in his veins. He marvelled at the ways of Providence. Milton had a respite. It might be a long one. Such storms could last for hours. Even that could be an under-estimate. With gradually diminishing ferocity, a really violent storm could linger on for days.

There was not a prowling Sioux to be seen when the almost incessant lightning illuminated the surrounding terrain. Moreover, the thunder made of conversation a disjointed affair of unfinished sentences and barely audible words.

Impelled by instinct, the defenders took advantage of the situation to organise themselves. The

bulk withdrew to neighbouring buildings in search of rest and refreshment. A few—with Ted among them—remained at their posts, shielding with the slickers brought them by friendly hands already sodden clothes.

Joe Watson and Seth Peabody foregathered in the former's office at the calaboose. Mace Kelly came to join them. "This storm is some considerable a blessing, fellers," he observed.

"Delays things," Joe Watson consented, "but I dunno. . . . Is going to hold the cavalry up more than somewhat, if so be they have started from Fort Angel a-tall."

Mace Kelly pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. The cheerful expression left his face. He shook his head and sighed.

Watson's grey eyes were thoughtful. "Don't want to give you the miseries," he said. "Maybe all will go keno yet. The best hope we got is that this is no more'n a local storm."

"You have something there," Mace Kelly assented. "The scrap held up, but the cavalry not. By Judas, that would be fine."

Seth Peabody ended the conversation with, "We're no worse off than we were. Even-steven again when the storm is over. Say, I doubt if this is a fresh shuffle—or even a new deck of cyards."

The Sioux submitted to the fury of the weather with all the spartan fortitude of their kind. Crazy Bear remained a born leader. He first saw to it

that the invaluable war-ponies were placed under adequate guard.

That done, with the majority of his followers, he took advantage of the protection offered by an in-sloping limestone wall. Blanket draped around him, he palavered with Yellow Horse in the driest spot of all.

Crazy Bear did most of the talking. Because his mouth and jaw still pained him, Yellow Horse contented himself with characteristic grunts and monosyllabic replies.

It was 'agreed that nothing further' could be done while the storm still raged. It was likewise agreed that the defenders of Milton could not escape in a body from the town. There were women and children among them. Women and children travelled slowly. Crazy Bear understood that white men had objections to deserting encumbrances of that kind.

Squaw and papoose were valued by Indians, too. An admirable trait, but a handicap to those who fought. Crazy Bear nodded to himself. That was why braves on the war-path left their women and children behind.

The problem of when—and if—the cavalry from Fort Angel might be expected exercised his tortuous mind. He inclined to the optimistic view. The Great Manitou of his fathers would see to it that by virtue of the storm the long-knives were suitably delayed.

He nodded again. The feathers of his war-bonnet clicked and rustled. There would be ample time to deal with Milton, leave it a blackened ruin, then return unobtrusively to the Low Hollow Reservation as already arranged.

But Crazy Bear's dreams were soon to be shattered. Leaping Elk, Swimming Fish and Swift Panther appeared before him, three drenched and exhausted braves. The long ride to rejoin the band had taxed them to the utmost. Even more jaded, drooping and spent were their three ponies.

They told their story, and as they told it, Crazy Bear's impassive countenance underwent a subtle change. His black eyes recorded insensate fury. For a moment, Swimming Fish, Leaping Elk and Swift Panther quailed.

Yellow Horse registered no emotion. Came another brilliant lightning flash. Crazy Bear utilised it to dismiss the three warriors with a lordly wave.

They departed, to obtain what food and rest they could. Crazy Bear addressed Yellow Horse, unwonted excitement in his guttural tones.

A wise leader, he was prepared to cut his losses. There were two mistakes in his judgment, however, although on the surface his reasoning was sound.

He was not to know that Major Willoughby was in command of men and horses worn out by protracted strain. Nor—though one fact offset the

other—had he any means of telling that the storm raging over Milton was a purely local storm.

He had questioned Leaping Elk, Swimming Fish and Swift Panther on that very point. Their replies had misled him badly. The trio had false notions of the storm's extent, having ridden through it on slow-moving ponies for many weary hours.

Crazy Bear thought, and thought deeply. There could be no destroying Milton now. All that mattered was to save himself, Yellow Horse, and their surviving warriors.

Retreat was the first essential. Follow that with a wide detour. A wide detour would carry the band round and behind the advancing cavalry. They would thus be spared battle with the men in blue who wielded avenging swords.

The storm was still savage, but abating a fraction. Crazy Bear felt certain of it. He was supremely weather-wise.

Rising to his feet, he issued orders. Huddled braves moved to obey him. Lithe figures flung themselves on to the backs of snorting ponies.

The Sioux rode off in a body. No one in Milton saw or heard them leave. Crazy Bear was in the van, with Yellow Horse beside him, the latter resembling some brooding Napoleon returning from Moscow through the eternal snows.

Rain, thunder and lightning did service for the vast carpet of white. The taste of defeat was in

Yellow Horse's mouth. He was as dejected in spirit as the famed Little Corporal had ever been.

Crazy Bear was more philosophical. He was going to live. Sure of it, he comforted himself with the reflection that he could act as a scourge to the hated paleface again.

Some ten miles distant, Harder, Bellamy and Ralton sheltered in a box-canyon with their followers. The cliff overhang at one end was extensive. The combined cowboys and outlaws had found enough dry wood to start several roaring fires.

Seeing no necessity for guard duties on such a wild night, the Running Maverick hands sprawled around in idleness, save for a few interested groups who—with spread blankets for tables—played the eternal games of cards.

Bellamy's ruffians were a shade more alert, but they, too, were willing to make the best of comfort that was remarkable under the circumstances.

Seated by the largest fire, Bellamy, Ralton and Harder fraternised. They had whisky to dull their senses. They drew appreciatively at strong cigars.

"Was sure a slice of luck," Harder said, "being able to hole up in here 'fore the storm cut loose. I got to give you full marks, Dirk, for reading aright the meaning of all them blarmed clouds."

"Was nothing to it," Ralton said. "But knowing of this canyon was surely a cinch. Judas

Priest!—sure would have been God-awful though to be stuck out on them open plains.”

Harder grunted agreement. The bearded Bellamy entered the conversation, saying, “Believe this storm is going to blow herself out. Yeah, just now up yonderly I see a star peep through.”

Harder and Ralton looked upwards, taking direction from Bellamy’s pointing finger—a finger illuminated by the glow of the fire.

The two men saw that Bellamy spoke the truth. The sky was clearing, as the clouds thinned rapidly.

There was no occasion for surprise. Western storms often travelled at terrific speed, freakish or otherwise.

“Rain’s easing,” the callous Bellamy said. “Been a-plenty of it. Enough to put Milton out, if so be—as is plumb likely—the Sioux set the dump afire.”

“Don’t need to copper no bets on that account.” He laughed. “Waal, boys, now the weather is shifting, we maybe can go look-see.”

The lightning ceased. The rain left off; the gale died down to an apologetic mutter.

Harder and Bellamy issued the equivalent of “boot and saddle.” Running Maverick hands and outlaws cantered from the box-canyon in a composite body.

They met the Sioux on a stretch of level plain. “Crazy Bear and his mob.” So saying, Bellamy

rose in his stirrups, waved a greeting with his greasy sombrero.

Atavistic devils lurked in Crazy Bear. They woke. He set his warriors to the charge. They raced towards the mixed force commanded by Ralton, Harder and Bellamy.

As the dawn gave place to full and lovely day, as the sun drew gentle steam from the soaking earth, Indians and white men locked together in bitter fight. Taken by surprise, outnumbered, the whites were overwhelmed by the howling Sioux.

Bellamy was tomahawked out of his saddle. A feathered lance pierced Ralton's throat. Harder died seconds after, but not before he had shot Yellow Horse in the throat, sent a bullet into the heart of a screeching Crazy Bear.

While the battle of extermination continued, miles distant the defenders of Milton thronged the barricades, scanning the surrounding terrain for signs of the cavalry. Their reasoning was simple. The Sioux were gone. Therefore, the troopers from Fort Angel could not be far away.

Ted extricated himself from the crowd. A few steps brought him face-to-face with Iris. He took her in his arms. She sighed. Ted whispered, "With the sun behind you, honey, I reckon you look more beautiful than any woman ought to be."

CHAPTER XXV

AN explosion rocked the Running Maverick ranch house. Joe Watson grinned. "Was quite a bang," he drawled. "Could be I ain't too good with dynamite. A wee smidgeon more and I would have blown the hull darn show away."

Followed by Ted, Iris, Seth Peabody and Mace Kelly, he entered the living-room of the ranch house through what had once been a door. The room itself was badly wrecked. A safe that could no longer claim to be safe occupied one corner.

Watson took a leather case from the battered iron receptacle. He thumbed back the catch of the leather case. Watched intently by the others, he read through a sheaf of papers. His brows moved up towards his hair. Once or twice, he whistled tunelessly.

"When we get back to Milton," he said, "we will be able to tell Dale Leander that Lance Harder was Luke Hornby. Leander will be some considerable tickled to learn his theorising was okay."

As though to himself, Watson went on, "Harder and all his thugs wiped out. Crazy Bear and Yellow Horse gone to the Happy Hunting

Grounds with a lot of their braves. The cavalry tailing the rest of the bunch. Heck, but them Low Hollow war-whoops won't ever skip the Reservation no more."

There was silence. Ted thought of Iris, Iris of Ted. Each spared a brief reflection for Dale Leander, whose painful shoulder wound was slow to mend, having finally laid him low.

Mace Kelly put a blunt question. "Discovered yet what Harder wanted with Sudden Range, Joe?"

"Why, yeah," Joe Watson told him. "Have you got proof of most everything 'bout Lance Harder here. Can guess the rest. And this," he held up a paper, "is a report by one of them ge-ol-o-gist fellers. Worked for Harder in secret. Is coal under Sudden Range. Know what that means? Everyone owning sections in Sudden Range will be rich as Wall Street presently."

Mace Kelly and Seth Peabody exchanged the glance of men who had learned to like and respect each other. "Coal," Seth Peabody murmured. Mace Kelly drawled, "Could be I'm worth a mint of mazuma. Waal, for evermore!"

They both looked at Ted. Ted's green eyes twinkled.

"You can keep your durn coal," was his verdict. "Me, I found gold—which is better—when I loc-ated my li'l Iris here."

